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Vol. I

JACK O' THE PLAINS OR THE HEADLESS MAZEPPA



By
PAUL BRADDON

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JACK O' THE PLAINS;

OR,

THE HEADLESS MAZEPPA.

By PAUL BRADDON.

Author of "The Mysterious Five," "The Hand of Fate," "The Masked Brotherhood," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

OVER forest and plain hangs the solitude of night.

The full moon casts its soft beams upon the earth, lighting to almost mid-day brilliancy the broad Savanna, while making weird, fantastic shadows 'mid the waste of timber which dot here and there the horizon-bounded expanse.

The creatures of day long since sought repose, but those of night are abroad in the full enjoyment of their freedom.

Birds of various kinds skim the air with snatches of song, their shrill notes answered ever and anon by the fierce growl of some wandering quadruped.

Unmindful of the beauties of the scene, in the deeper forest prowl the puma and the jaguar, while along the edges of the chaparral the gaunt wolf skulks, or on the open plain lurks its cowardly kindred, the coyote.

But suddenly a change comes over the scene.

The night bird's song is broken; the puma crouches low in his covert, and the sneaking coyote beats a hasty retreat.

The dull hoof strokes of a horse, half-muffled by the prairie grass, break the death-like silence.

Then the beasts of prey and the creatures of the air see a wild steed, white as the driven snow, come swiftly forward.

Can there be anything in that clean-limbed symmetrical form to alarm them?

Though they may never have seen a more perfect figure, yet this noblest of quadrupeds is a familiar object. Over the same domain with them does he roam at will in all the glory of his native freedom.

Then why the puma's second growl? Why does the coyote seek a greater distance?

Ha! there is a dark object on the white steed's bare back!

It is a man's form!

Ye powers! see the position he maintains.

Unlike a natural rider, he lies at full length on the flying steed's back.

As far as can be seen not a cord or thong holds him there.

But we forget this in the discovery of a greater mystery.

The figure is imperfect. There is something lacking!

The crouching beasts have discovered this.

The head is missing!

Otherwise the form is perfect. Can the missing part be concealed beneath that blanket?

It seems impossible.

Still, we have only a swift glance at the strange rider.

Like the flash of a meteor his white steed comes and goes.

Unmindful of the coyote's fear or the puma's rage, little heeding whither he is borne, the Headless Mazeppa rides on and on.

Soon leaving the shade of the timber, the white steed, unhampered by a bit, and subject to his own free will, rushes over the moonlit plain, heading westward.

In a little more than as many minutes three miles have been measured by his tireless feet.

Then a long line of growth, following the margin of a stream, looms into view.

A little later the white steed reaches its shadows, and then the river.

Plunging into the tide, and pausing a minute to drink of the flood, it wades through the stream and springs up the farther bank.

Stopping long enough to shake the water from its dripping sides, the creature resumes its wild flight, only to be brought at bay the next moment.

The gleam of a camp-fire suddenly bursts upon its vision, and a human voice checks its headlong course.

"Good heavens, boys, look there!"

The speaker has sprung from the earth, roused from sleep by the steed's approach, and now looks upon the nocturnal visitor with wonder.

Giving a shrill snort, the creature sniffs the air and defiantly faces him; standing less than three rods distant.

In an instant the man is reinforced by five companions, who spring from their blankets to join him.

"What is it, Joe—Injuns?" asks the nearest.

In reply the first points at the strange rider.

"Ghost of Mad Walker!" exclaimed one of the others, "it is the Headless Mazeppa!"

"The same horse we saw on Wilder Plain yesterday," added a fourth. "Don't scare him, Joe, and mebbe we can capture the creature."

"Kaptur the whirlwind!" retorted the other. "I stood on Wilder Plain yesterday and see'd the critter go a league in three minnits if it went a rod. Ha, it is goin'!"

The white steed is indeed moving away—starting slowly as if challenging pursuit.

"I'd give two hundred dollars to have that hoss!" exclaimed he who had spoken first.

"Come, boys, let's foller and kapter the animal."

"Don't do it," warns one who had not spoken before. "It is death to foller the white hoss!"

"Bah! I'm not afraid. Mazeppa or no Mazeppa, death or no death, who dares to go with me? See, the creetur' is goin' fast."

"I am with you, Wilkes Gray," responds one.

"Come along, then, Jim, or we shall be too late."

The Rangers, for such these half-dozen intrepid men are, have their horses tethered near at hand, and shortly Wilkes Gray and his companion are in the saddle.

By this time the white steed is well out on the plain.

"Don't go, Wilkes," cries one, the leader of the Rangers. "It is a death trail to the man who follows the Headless Mazeppa."

With a light laugh the reckless scout plies the spurs to his fleet-footed horse, and with his companion beside him he dashes away.

"Look for us back afore morning," he cries, with a wave of the hand.

In silence the four watch their departure until they vanish in the distance.

"Poor boys!" exclaimed the Ranger chief, "mebbe we ought to foller 'em. But I've alwus found it a chap's duty to look arter hisself first. Sides, our horses need more rest if we'd get to the fort to-morrer."

The speaker was a well-known character on the south-western border and an odd genius with all.

Though young in years, he was old in the experience of border warfare.

In turn hunter, guide, scout and ranger, he was "at home" in all parts of the great south-west.

Strong in limb, lithe in form, with an eye that could look at the mid-day sun without flinching, and a constitution that seemed to defy fatigue, he had become the hero of many hair-breadth escapes, perilous trails, and wild adventures.

His genial, good-looking countenance was hailed with delight by a large circle of friends and companions.

His name had been lost in the *soubriquets* bestowed upon him.

Among the red men he was known as the "Winged Trailer," the "Flying Shot," etc.

Hardly less fanciful his companions had nicknamed him "Jack o' the Plains."

Though the leading spirit of the little band, he was the youngest of the Rangers. They were hardy, gallant plains and mountain men, who had faced death too often to show the white feather, now that the frosts of life's autumn had plentifully sprinkled their dark locks with silver-flakes.

First in size and height stood Paul Van Wort—"Grizzly Van"—six feet six inches in his moccasins, with a frame of equal proportion, and strength of a mountain lion.

Side by side with him, as far as feet and inches were concerned, stood Joseph Garlon—"Longfoot Joe"—with a form as straight and wiry as the hickory wiping stick to his never-failing rifle. He had been the companion of Deaf Smith for many years, and was noted as being the fleetest runner on the Texan border.

Last in inches, but certainly second in no respect as regards bravery or skill in woodcraft, was Daniel Dones—"the White Fox"—who had passed his earlier life among the Comanches, to escape at last, that he might wage a relentless war against them in return for slaying the last of his kindred.

Swamp Wilkes and English Jim, now on the trail of the Headless Mazeppa, were not behind the others in those qualities needed to become a thorough Texan Ranger.

With this brief description of our hardy little band, happen what may, we shall not look for unworthy deeds.

Alive to the perils and hardships of border life, theirs was no common part to act, and to such men Texas owes a debt she can never pay.

CHAPTER II.

"Oh, they'll be back soon, soon for their ride," declared Van.

"I hope so, but I ain't so tarnal sure," said Longfoot Joe, with a dubious shake of his head. "They do tell mighty queer stories o' that speerit steed and Headless Mazeppa."

"And they are bilin' hot, too!" exclaimed Jack o' the Plains. "Me and Big Lige met the critter on our way to Oak Ranch t'other day, and after hailing the chap I up with my old iron and let her speak. But great turnle-bugs! I didn't scatch the critter, let alone stoppin' it."

"Little wonder," added White Fox. "The bullet was never run to crimson a hair on its spotless form."

"Lead won't, ennyway," answered Jack. "Mebbe silver would."

"But say, Jack, ain't the chap on the white hoss an old chum of yours?" asked Joe.

"Burnt smoke! that's wot puts the blinders on me. He and I hev had menny a long trail together, and menny's the night we've corraled our winkers under the same blanket."

"He was as true a chum as ever looked through hind sights, and blame me fer a digger squaw ef I didn't hev to throw dust in my peepers to keep the boys from thinkin' I war squeamish when they said he had gone under."

"He was a proper lad, but I'm afeerd sumthin' went wrong with him. But Wentworth saw him fall by a Comanche bullet and helped to earth him; but dead men don't cavort round like that less sumthin's twisted."

"But he never rode a white hoss," said Van.

"Nary onct. He rode a blood bay—the mate to mine."

"Jesso," supplemented Longfoot Joe, "and that white hoss has been seen on the prayer for more'n two summers."

"I'member me and Tom Bills followed the creetur nine days last season, bound to kapter it; but, Lor' sakes, we mought es well hev tried to trap a streak o' lightning."

"It led us way up north 'mong the howling Kioways; then it took a turn t'other way. Sumtimes it was afore us and sumtimes abint us!"

"Bimeby we thought we hed cornered the creetur sure. Ye see, we war way up to Phantom Hill and had driven it in 'mong the cliffs and drop-offs, so that all 'scape was stopped, 'ception whar we stood."

"The creetur's mine!" cried Tom, startin' forward.

"No more yourn than mine," I said.

"To be square we decided to pull sticks, best two in three, the longest havin' the hoss."

"Wal, may I be whipped by a Greaser ef afore we got through that tarnal hoss didn't shin that glare rock and spin off like a top on wings!"

"Tom and I kem back feelin' worse than two rabbits that had lost their ears."

"Wagh, burnt smoke! but you kem out a sight slicker'n Mexican Matt and Jake Reynard did," declared Jack o' the Plains.

"They started out to kapter the white hoss, Mexican Matt vowing that he'd lasso the critter or dance a lead in Satan's tan-pit."

"It savors a heap as if he did both. Leastways, he roped the wild hoss and got roped himself."

"Somehow he got tangled up in the line. He was thrown from his saddle and his hoss got away, but he war dragged on the prayer till thar warn't nough of him to fill a buzzard's tooth."

"And what 'came o' Jake?" asked White Fox.

"Ask Van!"

"He war found on the prayer, stone dead," replied that worthy, in an awe-inspiring tone.

Thus they continued telling wild and strange stories of the mysterious steed, while they anxiously watched and waited for the return of their companions.

But they looked and waited in vain, until at last their conversation ceased, and they gazed upon each other with dread forebodings.

At last, as the gray light of morning began to show in the eastern horizon, Jack said:

"Boys, this won't do for us. Mebbe Wilkes and Jim need us. Let's follow 'em."

"I'm with ye," declared Grizzly Van, quickly.

"So am I," said Joe.

White Fox had already started toward his horse.

A minute later the four were riding away from the growth upon the trail of their missing companions.

As the light increased they scanned the surrounding prairie with eager gaze, but no living thing met their vision.

The rising sun had ushered in another day when they paused.

"It's no use to go on," said White Fox, looking back with anxious gaze.

"Let's toe it a little longer," answered Jack o' the Plains.

"Burnt smoke! I see something on the prayer!"

His sharp vision had caught sight of a dark object lying on the plains.

Riding forward with bated breath, the rangers soon distinguished a human form stretched at full length upon the earth.

A minute later a single exclamation left the lips of all:

"It's Jim!"

Then, as they reached the fatal spot, Jack sprang to the ground and knelt beside the motionless figure.

"Is he dead?" asked Van, more to break the silence than aught else, for the pallid face told its own story.

"Dead," repeated Jack, slowly; "dead as the pecan that fell last year."

Ay, English Jim was indeed no more of earth. But what mystified his friend most was the singular fact that his body bore no signs of violence.

He lay as if he had fallen upon the prairie asleep.

"No more than I expected," declared Van.

"Nor I," said Dones.

"But whar is his horse?" asked Joe.

"Half way to the settlement by this time," replied Jack.

"And the quicker we head that way the better," averred White Fox.

"But we'll give poor Jim a funeral first," affirmed Jack o' the Plains. "Then thar's Wilkes. Mebbe we ought to look arter him a bit."

"Let him go," exclaimed White Fox. "He war told better."

"That ain't for us to say," said Jack. "We all run blind sometimes. Come, lend a hand, and we'll fix Jim so the buzzards won't pester him."

Willingly the others gave their assistance, and a little later a mound of fresh earth marked the spot where English Jim had met his fate.

"Where now—the settlement?" asked White Fox, anxious to turn back.

"On to the rescue of Wilkes," cried Jack, leaping upon the back of his blood bay.

"And I am with you," exclaimed Van.

"Reckon old Longfoot never goes back on a friend," said Joe, spurring his horse after the others.

If White Fox desired to turn back he was ashamed to do so, and he, too, sped after Jack o' the Plains, who was urging his fleet-footed bay on to its utmost.

With his long, tawny hair streaming out behind him, and his clear, blue eyes piercing the distance before him, the intrepid ranger led the way, going faster and faster, until the light feet of the noble bay scarcely bent the wild flowers growing on the lea!

He was soon leaving his companions!

"Hyur!" cried Van, "ef ye want our company ye must put on the brakes a leetle."

Slackening the wild gait of his steed somewhat, Jack said:

"Scuse me, boys, but I got to thinking about Wilkes. I'm afraid we shall be too late!"

Half an hour later they came in sight of a long line of growth.

Riding toward it, they soon discovered the figure of a horseman outlined near its edge.

"Mebbe it's Wilkes," cried Jack, who was still ahead.

"Jesso," answered Van; "but look further down. As I live, thar is the Headless Mazeppa!"

CHAPTER III.

THE others saw, with a look of alarm, the white steed and its strange rider.

"We'll ride up to the other chap first," said Jack, leading the way in that direction.

They soon saw, to their disappointment, that the horseman was not Wilkes Gray.

He was a younger man—not more than two or three-and-twenty.

He was of medium size, well-proportioned and good-looking.

His dark-brown hair was cut quite short, and his mustache carefully trimmed.

He wore a stout, dark-gray jacket, and unmentionables of the same material, while he had on a pair of boots with fancy tops.

From a stout, leathern belt protruded the butts of a pair of revolvers, and in his hands he held somewhat gingerly—a fancy-looking, silver-mounted, double-barreled rifle.

His hands were white and soft as a woman's, while his face lacked the bronzed hue of one who had lived an out-of-door life.

His horse was a noble-looking quadruped which promised both speed and endurance.

All this the rangers saw at a glance, and Grizzly Van exclaimed under his breath:

"Great Taylor! a greeny right from his marm's apron strings."

"Good-morning, gentlemen," greeted the stranger, as the surprised plainsmen came within speaking distance. "I am glad to meet you. I was feeling lonesome and uncomfortable after a night in the woods."

"Mornin', younker," returned all but Jack, who gazed upon the young man in silence.

"Lone, younker?"

"Yes. I started to go to Bowman's Springs and have lost my way. Perhaps you can direct me to the place."

"I reckon as we hail from thar," replied Van. "Mebbe ye are from the States?"

"Yes; my name is Roman Carson, and I am from Mississippi."

Jack uttered an involuntary cry as the other gave his name.

"Ashes and smoke!" he ejaculated, "it's queer. You look a heap like him!"

"Like whom?" asked the young Mississippian, catching the words.

"Scuse me," replied the Ranger chief. "I was spoking to myself, though you do look a proper sight like an old pard of mine."

"But mebbe you can tell us of a chap has been this way. We are looking for a lost friend."

It was the stranger's turn to show surprise.

"Did he ride a black horse with white feet?"

"True as preaching."

"And wore a wolf-skin cap?"

"Every time."

"Then he rode by this morning, his horse going at the top of its speed, and he lying forward upon its withers with his arms around its neck."

The rangers gazed upon each other in amazement.

"It must have been Wilkes."

"But," continued Carson, "I have just seen the strangest sight—a milk-white steed with the headless body of a man upon its bare back."

"The Headless Mazeppa. Thar he is—no, it's gone!"

The white steed had disappeared from view.

"We mustn't dally here," cried Jack o' the Plains, "if we would rescue poor Wilkes. Will you go with us, younker?"

"I can't do any better."

"Then lead the way to where you seed our friend, riding like mad."

Without further delay the cavalcade started forward.

Five minutes later Carson showed the rangers where he had seen Wilkes Gray.

Half a mile from the place they found a dead horse. It was the animal once ridden by English Jim.

Here was more mystery.

"It must be that Wilkes has started for the settlement," said White Fox.

Before the others could reply the Headless Mazeppa could be seen just leaving the growth, now behind them.

"The white horse is goin' for its old stampin' ground," said Longfoot Joe.

"Mebbe; but I'm all snarled up!" declared Jack. "This chap hyur looks enough like my old chum to be him. Can't you see it, boys?"

"Great guns! he does, and I didn't see it afore," exclaimed Van.

"An' his name's the same," added Joe.

Young Carson looked surprised.

"It can't be you have seen my brother?" he cried. "His name is Hubert Carson."

"Ashes and smoke! you have corraled him the first throw."

Falling to comprehend the words, the young man caught him by the arm, crying, excitedly:

"Is it possible you know my brother? Where is he?"

"Jess undo that paw, younker. You are a powerful sight on gripping—worse nor a perayer dog."

"But you have not told me of Hubert Carson—my brother."

"All 'cause you don't give me a fair show. I know'd a chap by that handle onct, though he war generally singled out as Brazos Bert."

"You knew him *once*. Is—is he dead now?"

"Yes—the Comanches rubbed—"

"Dead—my brother dead? Oh, God! am I too late?" and the speaker reeled to and fro, as if he would fall from his seat.

The others looked on in wonder.

"You 'pear to feel all strung into capers," said Jack o' the Plains. "But if I do say it—and he war my chum, hoss and blanket—Brazos Bert war as true a pard as ever looked through hind-sights. I'll lay my powder-iron, too, that he turned up his toes like a man!"

"And I must go back to tell them he is dead? I have hoped in vain. But before I go you must show me his grave. Will you do that?"

Jack o' the Plains looked perplexed.

"Pardon me," cried Carson—"let me tell you why I have come here, and then you will not wonder. Will you listen?"

"Yes. Chip in, younker, only while you chin it we might as well be poking 'long toward the tim'er."

As they rode slowly on their way Roman Carson told the following singular story:

"As I have told you, I come from Mississippi. My brother Hubert is ten years older than I am, and as he left home over fifteen years ago, you may judge that I have but an indistinct recollection of him. When father's passion is aroused he is a very violent man, and I think my brother must have inherited something of his nature, for, as young as he was then, he and father had a fearful quarrel. From words they came to blows, when mother rushed forward to separate them, to receive a blow from Hubert which felled her senseless. Of course brother had not intended to strike her, and as she lay dead, as all supposed, he fled, wild with grief, and with father's curse ringing in his ears. That was a terrible time; but mother soon recovered, though to this day Hubert has not been seen. You may judge something of the grief arising from his disappearance and the sorrow that rests upon the old home. Never a word was heard from Hubert until a short time ago a stranger coming from this region said he had seen a man by that name. Father and mother would not rest until I started in quest of the long-lost one. They are now quite aged, and you may imagine somewhat their anxiety. For their sakes, above all others, I pray I may find brother alive and well."

Jack o' the Plains shook his head.

"God pity them if he is dead."

"And God only knows," declared the ranger chief.

"Then you do not know that he is dead?" cried the other eagerly.

"Younker," said Jack, slowly, "all thar was earthly of Hubert Carson is borne on the back of that white hoss. Whether living or dead I cannot tell you."

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN at last Roman Carson spoke, he said: "Oh, that is worse than I dared to think.

But he must be rescued. I will start at once to save him."

"Younker, don't fire your gun afore you take aim. Better men than you have tried in vain to kapter that hoss. Our dead pard and the one missing war trying to do that same thing. It is a dead trail to follow that white hoss, and every chap who has tried it has proved it so."

"Your words do not frighten me. All that I ask is: are you sure it is my brother?"

"As sure as I sit on this hoss."

"Then only death can stop me from going. I must know the worst, and knowing it, do my duty."

The others heard his words with amazement.

Then Jack o' the Plains exclaimed, impetuously:

"Boy, you are true grit. *I am going with you!*"

His companions were more surprised than ever.

"Ye are mad, Jack!" exclaimed White Fox.

"Mebbe; but the more I think on't the more determined I am to go. Brazos Bert war too true a pard to desert when he needs help. 'Sides, I shall be company for the younker."

"Comp'ny on the long trail," said Van, grimly.

"Wal, tell 'em down to the Springs that Jack o' the Plains war game to the last. Gin us your paws, old boys."

"It looks meaner nor a Greaser," said Van, trembling visibly, as he grasped his companion's hand. "But don't go, Jack. Ye'll never kem back."

"More'n likely; but it'll be all the same to the rest of the world, and who's thar to cry their eyes out if this chibld does happen to turn his toes up? But hold on, old hosses, I have a favor to ask. Packed away in my possibles are a few gim-cracks and things that might do the most good to the ones I want to have 'em, wagh!"

"Younker, mebbe you can sling paper words round slick, and mebbe you have the fixin's handy. Jack Shelby will make his will, and then he is with you hoss and gun."

Understanding what was wanted, Roman produced a slip of soiled paper—the best he had—and the stub of a pencil.

"Ready," said Jack; "now ding it down just as I tell you."

"I, Jack o' the Plains, full of sense as a gun with hind sights, 'bout to set my floating sticks on the war trail of the white hoss Mazeppa, that savors a heap of dead men, do call this my last will and testament. Have you got that?"

"Yes."

"Good." Then he gave a brief account of his personal property and the disposition he wished made of it in case he should fail to return from his present hazardous undertaking.

"Thar," he said in conclusion, "I must make my sign and then it'll go slick."

Seizing the pencil, he quickly scrawled his initials upon the paper.

"Hyur, Van, I gin this into your keeping; and remember, Jack Shelby never turned his back to friend or foe. Good-bye."

Nothing further was said as the rangers wrung their companion's hand, and he turned his bay toward the north.

"Foller me, younker," and the twain rode swiftly away.

Jack kept his gaze straight ahead, but Roman, looking back after they had gone nearly a mile, saw the three rangers where they had left them, evidently watching them out of sight.

Young Carson's mind was filled with wild, vague forebodings, but as his new-found friend seemed little disposed to talk, he remained silent.

They must have ridden fully two hours, when, as they reached a small patch of growth, Jack drew rein.

"It's agin hoss nature to hold out forever," he said, "so we'll gin our animals a little breathing spell."

"Strange we have not seen the white horse since we started," said Roman.

"Not a bit strange, younker. It must have toed it right smart for its old stamping ground that is a long way north. We shall soon strike

the ten league pass, and if we can't find the critter's trail thar we might as well turn back."

After a two hours' halt they resumed their journey.

About the middle of the afternoon the country began to show a different aspect.

Before them, as if the fertile plain had suddenly been transformed into a barren waste, lay as far as the eye could reach a broken, treeless expanse unrelieved by a single redeeming feature.

"It is the Red Lands," said Jack, as they paused on the bank of a small stream which seemed the dividing line between the rich prairie and the rugged desert.

A narrow belt of growth skirted the shallow river on the first side, and on the other the unproductive sand reached to the water's edge.

The ranger rode down to the stream in silence, and along its margin for some distance he slowly advanced, watching closely the earth, while Roman waited behind.

Jack o' the Plains soon disappeared, and it was several minutes before he returned. His countenance bore a look of disappointment.

"We are throwed from our feet," he said. "The critter ain't come this way."

"Perhaps it has gone further south."

"Then it's a long way thar. You see, this pass is the only chance to get to the North Divide without going a long distance south or north. I thought sure the critter'd come this way."

"But we shall find it on the other side."

"Mebbe. But ashes and smoke, younker, it are ten leagues thar, and no fodder on the way. You see that this pass is less than half a mile wide all the way, with an impassible cut-off on the right, and a drop-off on the left."

"In all of the thirty miles thar isn't a living bush or blade of grass, nor a drop of water!" Roman listened with dismay.

"Then what shall we do?"

"Only one thing, old coon. We have come too far to turn back, and it's too late in the day to enter the pass, so we'll ride up the crik a piece and stop thar till morning. Then our horses will be ready to make Ten League Gap, and we'll come out on the other side slick. What do you say?"

"I leave it with you. You know best."

"Come this way, tnen," and he rode up the growth, followed by Roman.

Half a mile above where the stream made a slight curve Jack declared was a good place to camp, and accordingly they dismounted, allowing their horses to eat their fill of the grass.

"Reckon I shall have to shoot a bird or something," declared the ranger, "for my stock of dried meat is 'bout gone, and we may need it more by'm by. You keep a sharp lookout hyur and I'll stir round a little."

With the words Jack went still further up the stream in quest of game.

Roman grew uneasy when he had been alone awhile, so he went back from the stream to the edge of the growth, when he gazed upon the boundless expanse of prairie.

How grand and lonely it seemed to him as he scanned its unbroken surface without a sign of life.

But he was suddenly aroused from his meditations by the sharp spang of a rifle.

CHAPTER V.

THE ride report came from above him, and Roman felt certain that Jack had found game. He was startled the next minute by the hoof-strokes of a horse rapidly approaching.

He sprang back into the deeper cover of the growth, expecting to see a body of foes riding down upon him.

There seemed to be but one horse, however, and to his surprise a riderless animal bounded past.

The horse bore a saddle and all the trappings as if just freed of its rider.

"Jack has shot some one!" flashed through his mind.

The steed, after galloping past him, kept down the edge of the growth until it wheeled to enter the timber and sweep on toward the Ten League Pass. At that moment he was startled

by feeling a hand laid heavily on his shoulder, and turning he saw Jack o' the Plains beside him.

"S'prised, younker?" asked the ranger with a smile.

"Yes; but that horse—what has happened?"

"Doin's that knock me blind. Did you see that hoss?"

"Yes."

"He is the one your brother rode!"

"Impossible."

"Nary time. I should know it in Mexiker. And the trappings are all just as he left 'em."

"The critter jumped out of the brush when I fired my gun. Did you see the way he steered?"

"Toward the pass, I think."

"I'll trot down and see. Keep a sharp look-out here."

Fifteen minutes later he returned, saying that the horse had gone on toward the North Divide by the way of the Ten League Pass.

"We'll be likely to find him to-morrer," said Jack. "Anyway we will let him go to-night."

He next turned his attention to cooking the meat he had got, and by the time night had set in they had eaten a hearty portion, and their horses had filled themselves with prairie grass.

Tethering their animals near at hand, the twain spread their blankets under a pecan-tree preparatory to making "a night of it."

Not considering it safe for both to sleep at once, Roman took his turn first at watching, while Jack rolled the blanket about him and soon fell asleep.

A couple of hours must have passed, and the watcher was nodding drowsily, when a low, sweet voice, as of some one singing, was borne to his ears.

In an instant he was wide awake, and glancing wildly around, his gaze became fixed upon an unexpected scene.

Upon the utmost crest of the massive cliff before him, outlined in the weird, semi-darkness with striking effect, was a woman's figure, her long flowing hair floating out upon the gentle night breeze, and her hands upraised as if in supplication.

Roman gazed upon her entranced. It was not light enough for him to see her features distinctly, but the white face turned toward him was evidently that of a maiden of great loveliness.

At least, he thought so, and as her voice was again wafted to his ears it seemed the sweetest he had ever heard.

This time the song was loud enough to waken Jack, who started to his feet.

Roman turned for a moment, saying:

"Look! did you ever see so lovely a sight?"

When his gaze again sought the cliff the fair being had vanished.

"Did you see a party gal, old hoss?" asked Jack, calmly.

"Yes, the loveliest I ever saw. Who can she be?"

His companion gave a light laugh, and then exclaimed:

"Ashes and smoke! it's no more than I expected."

"What? Who was that beau—"

"Are you crazy, boy? But I forgot you were a stranger in these parts. That gal you seed was the Angel of the Red Land. But her 'pear-ing to us is a sure sign that we are going to have rough and tumble times. If you want to snooze go ahead. I shan't put down a winker agin to-night."

"But you have not told me of that girl. Do you know her? Is—"

"Know her, younker? Did you ever spoke to the ghost of your gran'-daddy? She's a spook!"

"A what?"

"A spook. Some years ago a chap crossing the prairie hyur about with his family got rubbed out and all his folks. Ever since the spirit of his darter has haunted the Red Lands."

Roman listened with amazement.

"Oh, you needn't look that way. It am a fact."

"Fact or not, I am going up where she is."

"Wal, go 'long, younker," replied Jack, grimly.

Roman quickly saw the impossibility of his intentions, as no one could gain a foothold on the side of the smooth, precipitous height.

"In mercy's name, Jack Shelby, what does it mean? That woman was no ghost."

"Mebbe ye think so, but if ye were 'quainted round hyur mebbe you wouldn't. She's a live spook."

Jack seemed in earnest, and nothing could change him.

"Is there no way to get up there?"

"Yes, by going round."

"How far is that?"

"Forty miles or so."

Roman said no more.

"Younker, it is no use to talk any more about it. If you want to catch that white hoss jess take your nap so we can start arly in the morn-ing."

Though he said nothing further, Roman's mind was filled with wild conjectures.

A little before sunrise the next morning they were ready to resume their journey, and vaulting into the saddle, they rode down to the entrance to the pass.

Jack paused near the bank with a low exclamation of joy.

"Look thar!" he cried. "The white hoss has gone along in the night. The critter is ahead of us."

Fresh hoof-prints were indeed plainly seen, and the steed had crossed the stream.

"Hooray!" exclaimed Shelby. "Foller me, but look out for your top-knot!"

As they dashed out of the water and came up on the western bank they paused long enough for their horses to shake their dripping forms, when Jack pointed ahead with a look of amazement.

Well he might be surprised, for a strange sight met their gaze.

Ahead, suspended, as it seemed, in mid-air was the form of a horse!

It was rendered more unnatural by its position—heels up and head down—an inverted steed!

It was defined plainly enough for them to see a man's form lying horizontally under its back! Nothing further was needed to prove to them that it represented the Headless Mazeppa.

Roman was the first to speak.

"It must be a mirage, caused by the rising sun."

"Great smoke! it am queer. The signs are all agin us!" exclaimed Jack o' the Plains, watching the strange scene with intense interest.

CHAPTER VI.

THE strange apparition began soon to disappear, and in a few minutes it had vanished.

Jack drew a breath of relief.

Though brave to a fault, the ranger, like the majority of his class, was superstitious, and anything that seemed supernatural gave him fears nothing else could arouse.

"Wal, younker, we must go on. It won't do to turn back now. No, it shan't be said that Jack Shelby was a coward, though he knows he is going on his death trail. Come on; we are on the right track, and we must foller it through."

With the words he started forward, closely followed by his companion.

We need not dwell upon the details of that lonely journey, though nothing wilder or more tedious could be imagined.

The trail did not follow a direct course, but was a succession of zig-zags, ever walled in upon the right with an insurmountable height of rock, and on the left a continuous precipice bounded the way, while in that direction, as far as the vision could reach, extended a wild, broken waste covered in places by a dead growth of oaks and smaller trees.

From half a mile in width, where it left the prairie, the pass soon narrowed to twenty-five rods.

The thin layer of earth which covered at places the rocky bottom had yielded a stunted growth, which, however, had long since died, giving a still more desolate appearance to the scene.

Huge boulders were scattered here and

there, at some places nearly stopping all passage.

It is enough to imagine a ride of thirty miles through such a country without having to experience it.

The horses of our adventurers were equal to the task, and the sun was less than two hours high when Jack reined up, saying:

"Wal, boy, we are half way through. Ain't—hark! I hear some one coming."

The sound of an approaching horse grew rapidly plainer, and before Roman could speak the animal came into sight.

It was Brazos Bert's blood bay, alone and riderless.

"Smoke and ashes!" ejaculated Jack.

"Hyur, Redbird, kem hyur," he added.

At the sound of his voice the steed gave a glad whinny of recognition and approached him.

"D'ye see that, Rome, my boy?" asked Jack, as he patted the noble creature's head and neck. "He knows me. See how glad he is to meet Wingfoot. I tell you thar ain't such a pair—whew! another s'prise is comin'!"

The hoof-strokes of another horse were heard swiftly advancing.

Roman looked up with wonder, and Jack o' the Plains raised his rifle.

The suspense was quickly broken by the appearance of a new actor on the scene.

The new-comer was a woman!

At sight of them, for, in turning the angle of the pathway, she had come abruptly upon the scene, she reined up her horse with an involuntary cry.

Roman was dazzled by the beautiful vision she presented, while Jack seemed equally surprised, though from a different cause.

"'Tis the Angel of the Red Lands!" ejaculated Shelby.

"The same beautiful being I saw last night!" exclaimed Roman.

Unheeding their looks and speeches, the fair equestrienne advanced to their sides.

She could not have seen more than eighteen summers, and was as perfect a model of beauty as the artist could crave.

Her form was faultless, and her features as regular as a goddess of beauty. Her skin, rich in the tint of good health and pure air, was softly touched with the hue of the rose, giving increased loveliness to her radiant countenance, while a waving mass of golden hair fell to her waist in charming negligence.

She looked like a veritable forest princess clad in her half-civilized garb, and riding a clean-limbed Indian pony.

"White men," she said in a clear, sweet tone ere they could speak, "I thought you would come this way, and I have ridden to warn you of danger. You must turn back at once. Tiger Heart, the Comanche's mad chief, is coming with lots and lots of warriors!"

"Coming this way?" asked Jack.

"Yes—so! they come fast—fast as the wind! See, I ride my Zip till he no want to go furdur. I come long way tell yer."

Here was a dilemma.

As the girl finished her excited speech, she looked from one to the other in anxious suspense.

"You go?" she asked.

"How many redskins has old Tiger with him?"

"Lots and lots! more'n that, and that, and that, and that!" she replied, holding up both hands with separated fingers each time she uttered "and that."

"They are on the war-trail. They be here soon!"

Jack o' the Plains had "taken in the situation." If the Comanches were coming in the number told by the girl, it would seem like madness to meet them in an open fight. But his reply seemed to ignore the startling fact.

He spoke calmly:

"Jack Shelby was never known to double on his trail. Wagh! my pard can do as he chooses, but I am not going to turn back."

"But they come sure! They rub yer out!" and the maiden grew more excited.

"Don't borry any skulps on our 'count;

I hev a string full of fun! Hyur, younker, d'ye want to go back or stay with me?"

"I am with you if I only know what is wanted."

"Sho! you see 'em bowlders thar? Chance enough for us to hide while the varmints trot past. Understand?"

"Yes; but our horses?"

"Thar's the funny part. Mine'll lay flat as a pan of dough. S'pose yourn won't?"

"No, he—"

"Jesso. Reckon you had better let the critter go, and take Redbird hyur. It'll be a good swap."

Jack spoke hurriedly, and Roman had no time to hesitate.

Much as he hated to do so, he dismounted, and, giving his horse its freedom, he caught hold of the bridle-rein to his lost brother's horse.

"I s'pose your critter'll hang around and spoil our fun," said Jack, as the intelligent brute refused to leave his master.

"I'll take it with me," said the girl. "I must go ahead."

"Hist! the Comanches are coming! Oh, white men, fly while you can!"

"But what will become of you?" cried Roman.

"I can escape; but hide or you are lost."

The Comanches were now plainly heard, and with a look of pity the maiden urged her pony forward, leading Roman's horse beside her.

"I'd give—" began the young man, but Jack cut him short.

"Younker, if you valer your top-knot, follow me!"

There was no time to be lost.

Springing from his saddle, the ranger ran swiftly toward the bowlders, followed by his horse Wingfoot.

With a last glance after the departing maiden Roman dashed forward in the footsteps of Jack.

"Down, Wingfoot; down, Redbird," commanded Shelby, as they paused behind the rocks.

In an instant the sagacious animals dropped upon their knees, and then they lay close to the earth, still and motionless.

Jack selected a good position near by, and looked to the priming of his rifle as he calmly awaited the issue.

It had all come so suddenly to Roman Carson that as yet he failed to fully comprehend their situation.

"Keep steady nerves and do as I tell you," whispered his companion. "Thar come the varmints."

From their retreat they commanded a view of either end of the pathway, and for the first time in his life Roman looked upon the wild redmen in all the fierceness of their war-paint and feathers.

He saw them advance with breathless amazement, until it seemed as if the hosts of Hades had been turned loose!

The Comanches slackened their speed somewhat as they turned the angle in the trail and swept into view.

CHAPTER VII.

JACK O' THE PLAINS was calm and unmoved.

"Do you see Mad Chief at their head?" he asked of his companion.

Roman had seen the red leader, and was transfixed with horror.

The wild, terrible appearance of the warriors was lost when compared to their chief.

The latter was mounted upon the bare back of a coal-black mustang, his raiment consisting of wolf-skins with fur outside.

His hair, of an iron gray, fell in tangled masses far down his back, and a flowing beard, white as snow, reached to his waist. His features, as well as his other peculiarities of race, told that he belonged not to the kin of redmen, but his skin was bronzed until it was as dark as an Ethiopian's. A wild, unnatural light gleamed in his flashing eyes, and his whole bearing was wild and awe-inspiring. At that moment he gave expression to a yell of such startling volume and distinctness that it rang out far and wide, fairly chilling the blood in young

Carson's veins. Even Jack o' the Plains, used to the war-whoop of the savage, started. Striking his horse a smart blow, the Mad Chief dashed furiously on past the hiding whites, followed by his fiendish band, numbering fully half a hundred. Roman began to breathe easier as he saw them passing. As the foremost reached the next angle in their course, however, the entire horde came to a sudden halt.

Then a startling cry rang on the air, for one the fifty riders wheeled about.

"They are coming back!" hissed Jack.

The Mad Chief was indeed beating a retreat. An instant later a white horse came into sight.

It was the Headless Mazeppa!

Undaunted by the horde blocking its way, the strange steed, with a shrill neigh, advanced at a swifter pace.

There was no need of its turning aside, for with cries of terror the savages rushed from the pathway.

Unfortunately for the hiding twain, the Comanches dashed toward them, when the quick eye of Jack Shelby saw that discovery was certain.

"We are in for it now!" he exclaimed.

"Quick! up—into the saddle and follow me!"

Jack sprang to his feet.

"Up, Wingfoot, Redbird!" he cried, and before Roman could realize the situation, the intrepid ranger was in the saddle.

Wild yells rang from the amazed redmen.

Had Jack been alone he might have escaped before they recovered from their surprise.

But Roman Carson was not far behind.

As Redbird leaped up he gained his feet, and the next moment he sprang upon the steed's back.

"Now!" thundered Jack, "it's a ride for life. Show the red devils no quarter!"

Sending the contents of his rifle into their midst, he rode wildly forward, turning to the right nor left, but straight for the trail ahead.

Rearing, plunging furiously, his gallant bay sunk more than one redskin beneath its feet.

His rifle empty, Jack drew his revolvers, clearing the way before him with his deadly shots.

Roman followed in the path he made.

The Mad Chief rushed to the fight with yells that nerved his warriors to redoubled vigor.

Twice was Jack nearly hurled from his horse, and he received wound after wound.

Still noble Wingfoot pressed forward, and he maintained his seat.

Then, with a wild whoop, he reached the trail.

At that moment three or four Comanches seized the bridle-rein, and, in spite of the desperate steed's struggles, its flight was stopped.

Jack plied his spurs in vain.

His horse was nearly thrown back upon its haunches.

Jack himself was seized and almost pulled from the saddle.

With a mighty effort he rallied.

Snatching his long scalping-knife from its sheath, the bright blade flashed in the air, and as it descended he severed the bridle so that it fell from the horse's head.

"On, Windfoot—on!" he yelled, striking the rowels deep into the quivering animal's sides.

Freed from the clutches of the red demons, the bay sprang madly forward, and sending the dismayed assailants right and left, cleared them at a bound.

"Come on, younker!" cried Jack, as he fired his parting shot and cleared the startled redskins.

But Roman had been less fortunate.

Redbird leaped swiftly forward on the heels of its mate, while its rider imitated the example of Jack so far that he emptied his rifle into the phalanx of his foes.

Then, as the discomfited Comanches rallied from Shelby's attack, they hemmed in the flight of Roman, when he clubbed his fire-arm and swept them down with nervous blows.

He fought bravely, desperately, but the odds were overwhelming.

In vain he urged Redbird forward.

He shivered the stock of his rifle to splinters

upon the red fiends in his wild fight for freedom.

He plowed the rowels into the sides of his goaded horse, which, with a shrill neigh, leaped higher than ever, and, maddened beyond endurance, actually cleared the throng.

But the struggle was dearly paid for.

Carried swiftly onward by the onset the bay crossed the trail just as Jack effected his escape.

Wheeling with the rapidity of lightning, the horse swept after the other.

The sudden movement caused Roman to lose his seat, and, with a frantic attempt to regain what he had lost, he was thrown to the earth.

Deafening yells came from the savages as they saw him fall, and then they rushed upon him *en masse*.

Still defiant, Roman gained his feet just as the half hundred shrieking demons assailed him.

One against fifty!

There was no quarter for the single foeman. He felt that he was lost.

As a cloud of bullets and arrows whistled about his head he discharged his revolvers.

Then, with a ringing cry, he sprang back to escape his foes.

In his mad haste he heeded not his course.

In fact, only one way was open to him.

Escape on either hand was cut off.

Thus he bounded to the rear.

A few rods, and then he found himself on the verge of the precipice!

Further retreat was impossible!

Death or capture was inevitable!

The Comanches saw their advantage and uttered exultant cries.

With a hopeless glance around him Roman realized his doom.

A wild thought flashed through his mind, and at the moment when the yelling horde felt sure of their victim he turned with a defiant cry to leap out over the precipice, to disappear into the depths below.

Better death upon the rocks than captivity at the hands of such foes.

The yells of the savages died away and their looks of exultation changed to dismay as they witnessed the headlong leap to death.

CHAPTER VIII.

JACK O' THE PLAINS looked back in season to see Roman Carson make his fearful leap.

"Poor boy!" he cried.

Then the yells of the amazed Comanches rang out wilder than ever, as the mad horde, cheated of one victim, turned upon the other, urging their fleet-footed ponies after the flying ranger.

"Come on!" shouted the intrepid Shelby, waving his hand tantalizingly. "Hyur's a coon you don't trap!"

At that moment a horse galloped alongside.

It was the gallant Redbird that had succeeded in clearing the savages.

"Hooray!" exclaimed Jack, but a volley of bullets and arrows hurtling about his head checked further speech, and he found that he was in for a close run.

Though he had got a good start of his pursuers, the crooks and turns in his course made his flight doubly dangerous; and every time he reached one of these angles he was brought within easy shot of his foes.

They were not slow to improve these opportunities, and with every volley they made the air echo with their unearthly tumult.

Shouts and cries were alike unsuccessful, however, in staying the flight of the flying ranger.

Wingfoot was doing his best, and every moment saw the distance increased between the fugitive and his pursuers.

With the ten miles ahead of him, and every prospect of the race continuing that distance, Jack was too judicious a rider to keep Wingfoot strained to his utmost longer than was necessary.

Thus, as soon as he dared to do so, he allowed the horse to slacken his pace somewhat.

The race continued a mile or so without any material change, when, as he turned another

angle in the winding way, Jack found himself close upon the heels of the Headless Mazeppa.

With a wild snort the white steed bounded forward, keeping just ahead of the ranger.

Jack afterward acknowledged that the presence of this mysterious rider made him feel more uncomfortable than the shrieking Comanches in hot pursuit.

He could not avoid his singular situation, however, and thus the wild race went on another mile without any further change.

Then Jack heard cries ahead of him, and to his dismay a party of mounted savages appeared in the pathway.

They discovered him at the same time, and their yells mingled with those of his pursuers.

Jack had no time for speculation.

Acting with his usual presence of mind, he resolved upon a course as bold and reckless as his case was desperate.

Giving free rein to his horse, he yelled:

"On, Wingfoot, on!"

Understanding his master's wish, the bay sprang forward with redoubled speed.

Firm in his seat as a centaur, with a knife in either hand, Jack o' the Plains awaited the crisis.

The dismayed savages saw him rush upon them like an arrow from its bow.

They saw, too, the white steed that turned neither to the right nor the left, but swept directly upon them.

A few shots were fired, but yells of terror quivered upon their lips.

Then came the shock.

With a headlong bound that no hand could stay the Mazeppa leaped into their midst, and then cleared them.

"Hooray!" cried Jack, as he swept ahead.

Then, as he dashed through the gap made by the white steed, he dealt furious blows with either hand, performing a feat that few could do—slaying victims right and left at the same time.

But the fray lasted only an instant, for the second bound of Wingfoot carried him beyond the baffled foes.

Ere they could rally, Redbird ran the gantlet, and again reached the side of his mate.

Tiger Heart witnessed with dismay the daring performance of Jack o' the Plains, when yells of vengeance loud and deep went up from his motley throng.

Reaching their discomfited allies, they found six lying on the earth—lifeless.

Jack answered their howls of rage with a mocking laugh.

"Mebbe they'll learn to let us alone, eh, Wingfoot, me boy?" he said, patting the neck of his horse. "And you ain't no slouch, old Redbird. Say, old chap, come along hyur and let me ride you, so your mate may have a rest."

He made the change and put a safe distance between himself and pursuers before they rallied enough to renew their chase.

The white steed still kept slightly in advance of him.

There was no material change in the race after this, until at last the great plain of the north stretched before Jack's vision.

But the vast expanse was no new sight to him, who had traversed it from every point of the compass.

He could still hear the Comanches in the distance, but during the last five miles he had gained considerable upon them.

"I s'pose the varmints think they're running the old coon down, and that on their own soil they'll capture him slick. Reckon, me boys," addressing his dumb companions, "we'll show 'em a trick not to their counting."

Soliloquizing thus, he reached a shallow stream that, flowing from the north, found its course along the edge of the prairie, skirted on either bank by a dense growth.

Riding into the water, he went down stream for a dozen rods or so, when, turning about, he rode in the opposite direction, keeping in the middle of the stream.

His faithful horse Wingfoot, and it will be remembered that he was riding Redbird now, followed after him.

He had seen the Headless Mazeppa dash out upon the plain, to soon lose sight of him.

Jack followed the stream for a mile or more, when, coming to a small tributary, he left the main current, which here made an abrupt turn to the left.

After going a short distance further he halted.

"Reckon, boys, you have gone far enough to be glad to stop."

Saying which he sprang to the earth, and freed the horses of their trappings.

"Thar, don't go far, old steppers, and you may have two hours for rest."

Finding a nook among the rocks, he hid the saddles, bridles, etc., when he cautiously ascended a slight elevation of the broken land just ahead of him.

From this lookout he commanded quite an extensive view of the surrounding scene.

In the distance on the north he could see a considerable tract of woodland where he knew was the home of the Comanches.

Ay, as he gazed upon the plain he discovered the Mad Chief and his warriors heading away toward their camping-grounds.

"So you give up the trail to-day, old Tiger Heart?" said the ranger, with a broad grin.

"Wal, it am best for you. But it were a clus run for me, and the younker, poor boy! he's gone sure. He seemed a proper lad, I really liked him. Wagh! many's the pard that's gone down beside me; but it can't be so alwus. My turn'll come by and by, and then old Jack Shelby'll count his *coups* no more."

Speaking his thoughts thus, he continued to watch the scene for a long time, revolving in his mind plans for future action. At last he discovered a white object on the plain in the far distance. As it grew in size he recognized the white steed moving at random over the prairie.

"Poor Bert!" exclaimed Jack; "it weren't many moons ago that you and I had our big ride on this plain, and now—wal, I'll risky you from that posish, and then I'll take the trail against the Mad Chief. First I'll jest go down into the valler where the reds won't find me and run a silver bullet. With that, old white hoss, I'll strike your trail, and if you don't bite the dust, then I'll quit the diggings!"

Leaving him to carry out his intentions, we must return to learn the fate of Roman Carson.

CHAPTER IX.

As Roman went over the precipice he instinctively closed his eyes, feeling that his end was near. Down, down through the air he shot, until, with a shock that nearly deprived him of his senses, his descent was abruptly checked. He heard wild yells ringing in his ears, and his brain seemed in a whirl. He threw out his hands, but they met only empty space.

Had he reached the bottom of the precipice?

Slowly his scattered faculties came back to him, and at last he realized that he had been caught by the belt upon a shrub growing on the side of the embankment. Thus his life had been miraculously saved, though, as he gazed up the perpendicular ascent, he saw that he had no hope of scaling the smooth surface. It seemed a long distance to the earth below, and he felt a chill creep over his frame as he realized his hopeless position. He could no longer hear the cries of the savages, and he wondered if Jack had escaped. Bruised and sore, beside suffering from several flesh wounds, his situation was one of intense agony. Yet he was powerless to relieve one atom of suffering, or in any way escape.

When half an hour had tediously dragged away he began to think it would have been better for him to have been dashed upon the rocks below. Then a glad cry left his lips as the thrice-welcome sound of a human voice was borne to his ears. Without regard to what the consequences might be he cried aloud:

"Help—help!"

He heard a low cry in response, then a voice asked:

"Where are you?"

"Here—over the rock. I am nearly dead."

A minute later a fair face looked down from the cliff—a face he would never forget as long as he should live. An exclamation of joy left

his lips as he recognized the maiden who had warned Jack and himself of danger. She started back with surprise, but quickly recovering herself, asked:

"Are you much hurt?"

"No, but I am powerless to get away from here."

"Have courage a little longer and I will save you."

She was gone a few minutes, and when she came back she had a lasso in her hand. Dropping one end of the thong down to him, she said:

"Make it fast around your body; then Zip and I will pull you up."

Roman did as he was requested, when he felt the cord straighten, and then he was raised slowly upward until he could grasp the edge of the cliff. With her assistance he was enabled to reach the level earth above, when he sank down exhausted. Kneeling beside him, she began to chafe his hands and temples. How delicious her touch seemed to him. Looking upon her with half-closed eyes, he felt a thrill of pleasure.

"Will you be able to ride your horse?" she asked. "It won't do for us to remain here long."

"Alas! fair maid, I fear my horse is far from here."

"Not so, for I kept him in my charge. I did not go very far before I heard the fighting and stopped. As soon as I dared I came back, and I have your horse with me."

"How can I repay you, sweet maid? You have not only saved my life, but—"

"Tut, tut, stranger, if you wish to get away and are able to ride, come with me. We have no time to lose."

With some difficulty Roman found he could walk; and once in the saddle, he suffered but little pain.

"We can do no better than to go on toward my house, stranger," she said, as she headed her pony in that direction.

"My name is Roman Carson; and pray will you favor me with yours?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Carson; father calls me Dalia."

"An odd name. But is it possible you have your home in this lonely wilderness?"

"Not in the Red Lands; but it is on the edge of the great North Divide. You live a long way from here I s'pose?" and her great, lustrous eyes were fixed on Roman.

"Yes, a long way from here. But do you like to live in this country?"

"Oh, no; I hate it!" and her eyes flashed.

"Then, if I may ask, why do you stay here?"

"It is for poor father's sake."

Roman was mystified. Here was as beautiful a woman as he had ever seen living in this uncivilized country, though against her wishes. Her garb was what the fashionable world call uncouth, rude, and her grammar was unacquainted with the rules laid down by Lindley Murray. Despite these minor defects, which somehow seemed to enhance her charms, Roman was in love. Much as he longed to know the mystery concerning her, he curbed his impatience and bided his time. That was a ride never to be forgotten by him. For the time he forgot the perils surrounding them—ay, we fear he forgot Jack—and before he knew it he was telling his fair companion the object of his coming into that region, to find in her an ardent sympathizer.

"I would like to know," he said, as he finished, "if it were you I saw last night on the bluff overlooking the plain?"

"I was there," she replied, simply. "It is a favorite haunt of mine. You see I have a sort of secret path leading in a direct course across the Red Lands, and only about one-third the distance it is by this path. But when I get there I cannot well descend to the plain, so I remain awhile and then return to my home. As you have told me so much, I must tell you that I live all alone with my father. The same old place has been my home as long as I can remember almost. I'd like to go away so much, but poor father won't go. I don't think he is just right here," and she touched her forehead. "From what he has said, I know that

years ago, when I was a little girl, a lot of white men did him a terrible wrong which drove him up here, and all that I can say won't make him go away."

"But how do you manage to keep clear of the Indians?"

"Oh, father is on friendly terms with them. Yes, I must tell you that their chief, Tiger Heart, is his own brother!"

Roman could not suppress a cry of surprise at this startling information.

"It seems," she continued, "that he suffered more by the white men than father did, and he hates them so they call him mad. But he seldom comes to see us, and we get along quite well. Look, if you would see the great North Divide."

To his joy Roman saw that the western boundary of the Red Lands was only a short distance ahead. Beyond lay, further than the vision could reach, the fertile plains of the North, inhabited only by the fierce Comanches.

"We will go at once to my home," said Dalia, "though you must not be surprised if father's treatment is unpleasant. I think you will be the first white man he has seen for many years. Poor father! I pity him."

They soon left the trail and penetrated into the fastness of the barren land. Roman looked in vain for Jack o' the Plains. Nothing of him or the Comanches were to be seen. Pretty soon Dalia paused and pointed ahead, saying:

"There is my home, and there is father looking for me."

A lonely cabin was standing near the prairie. It was built in the most primitive style, and surrounded on both sides and in the background by the desolate Red Lands, which afforded here a stunted, half-lead growth. Roman gave the surroundings but a hasty glance, however, as his gaze became fixed upon the tall, cadaverous form of a man standing in the opening which served for a doorway to the cabin.

CHAPTER X.

He seemed past the prime of life, though he still bore his gaunt form erect, and his hair, worn long, was but slightly tinged with gray. His countenance was wrinkled and care-worn, while his deeply-sunken orbs of vision glowed with an unnatural fire. He was scantily clothed in a garb of skins, and at that moment he held in his right hand an ear of corn from which he had just taken a huge mouthful. At sight of Roman he started with amazement, and a low, guttural exclamation left his lips.

"Well, father, how have you fared since—"

"Whom are you bringing here, girl?" he demanded, fiercely.

"A friend, father!"

"A friend, Dalia? You are mistaken. We have no friends—no, not even brother Daniel is our friend! Where have you been?"

"Off for a canter, father. But have you no welcome for Mr. Carson?"

"He may come in. Yes, Mr. Carson, you may come in, though you are the first white man who has entered my door for fifteen years."

"Dalia, you should have known better than to have brought him here. He is our foe!"

"Pardon me," ventured Roman, "but you misjudge me. I have only the kindest intentions toward you and your daughter."

"Shah! You can't deceive me. But now that you are here, pray make yourself comfortable. What has brought you into this country? You don't look like the men who generally come this way."

"I came in quest of a lost brother."

"A lost brother? That is queer. I lost a brother once."

"And have you never found him?" asked Roman, not knowing what to say.

"Find him? No! He turned Injun! But dismount and come in. You may be hungry; if so, there is another ear of corn and a bit of cold meat. If you are thirsty, we have plenty of brook water."

Dalia had already sprung nimbly to the ground.

"Go in with father, Mr. Carson, and I will lead your horse down to the corral."

"Yes, come in, mister; don't mind the child;

she ain't just right here," and he touched his forehead significantly.

Roman started at the words and gesture, as he remembered how similarly she had spoken. As he entered the cabin he was struck with the barrenness of its contents. Upon one side a row of pegs in the wall about a foot and a half from the floor held a layer of poles which formed all that was in the room for seats. On the other side of the apartment, a little higher up on the wall, and wider by a foot, was a shelf answering for a table. If we except a pile of skins in one corner, which evidently served for a couch, the room contained nothing further toward the comforts of living.

"Look here, young man, from the way you stare around, I should think you had never entered a gentleman's house before."

"Pardon me, sir, I did not mean to be rude. But don't you find it lonely living here so far from civilization?"

"Somewhat, sir, but you know we are called upon to make many sacrifices. This life best suits my poor daughter, and so I am reconciled to it. There was a time when I longed for something different, but that time is past. Pray be seated, and if you are tired lie down upon those robes. You look about fagged out. Make yourself comfortable, and I will parch you some corn and broil a bit of meat."

At this juncture Dalia entered the cabin. She seemed to Roman more beautiful than ever, and the love she had kindled in his breast grew deeper. Then the dark hints thrown out by her father arose in his mind.

What did he mean? What was the mystery surrounding their lives?

"Have you found no trace of your lost brother?" asked the old man, as if determined to keep up a conversation. "Mercy, Dalia, what is the matter?" and he caught her by the shoulders and began shaking her vigorously. "There, do you feel any better?"

"Yes—yes, father. Don't tear me to pieces. I—I am well," and escaping from his hold, she ran to the other side of the room.

Roman looked on with surprise. He had seen nothing unusual about her appearance, save that she had suddenly grown pale and looked frightened.

"Poor child!" exclaimed her father, compassionately; "I fear you have taxed yourself too much. Go and lie down."

"Deed I ain't, father—"

"My child," and he spoke very firmly, "do as I have told you. You will feel better after a little sleep."

Without further remonstrance Dalia arose, and going to where a horse-skin hung upon the wall, pulled it aside and disappeared into an inner apartment of the cabin.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Carson, she will seem different after she has rested awhile. I am used to her freaks and do not mind them. But see, the meat is ready, and so is the corn. Will you not eat?"

Roman was fain to accept, and ate quite heartily of the plain viands set before him, while his host looked on in silence. Dalia did not reappear, much to Roman's disappointment. Finally the old man said:

"You didn't answer my question in regard to your brother, Mr. Carson."

"Alas! I cannot give a satisfactory reply. They tell me he is dead."

"Then you are not sure of it?"

"No; but he has been bound upon a wild horse, and—"

"A wild horse!" exclaimed the other. "Is the creature white?"

"Yes; and you know something of him?" cried Roman, excitedly.

"Know him—the Headless Mazeppa? I am the only one who does know him!"

Roman turned with amazement, to meet the other's flashing gaze.

"Then you can tell me all? Man, don't keep me in suspense!"

"Ha, ha! give me time. You are mad now! But you will be madder when I tell you all!"

"Why do you hesitate? I would know the worst at once."

"The worst! Ha, ha! Then listen: I put the Headless Mazeppa on the white steed—yes,

bound him there so he cannot get away. Yes, I bound him—my accursed foe, though he were your brother—on the back of the wild white steed, that no hand but mine ever touched—ever will!"

Roman Carson listened to the wildly-spoken words with speechless amazement. The old man seemed fearfully excited, and as he paced the floor he shook his head and waved his hands frantically. Before Roman could speak Dalia bounded into the room, crying:

"Oh, father, the Comanches are coming! They are almost here!"

Glancing out of the loop-holes that served for windows, Roman and her parent saw that she was right. Fully a score of the paint-bedaubed redskins, with Tiger Heart at their lead, were rapidly approaching.

"They must not see you!" cried Dalia to Roman. "They would kill you. Quick, follow me!" and she rushed into the adjoining apartment, followed by him, who was too much surprised to speak. "Cover yourself up with the skins," she cried, "and keep quiet!"

"But yourself and father?"

"They will not touch us. So have no fear."

Roman hesitated no longer, but did as she had told him.

"There," she said, "they will not think that you are here, and we will get rid of them as soon as possible. Hark! I hear them near at hand."

An instant later he was left alone. He heard her father give some hasty command, and then the savages bolted into the cabin, when a great noise and confused cries ensued.

CHAPTER XI.

TIGER HEART was foremost of the dusky throng that entered the hermit's cabin. If it were possible he looked wilder and fiercer than ever.

"Ho, Ochee!" he cried, addressing the old man, "hast a white dog passed this way?"

"Little mote I your question, chief. No white man could pass here while I'd a grain of powder left."

"What! not passed here?" cried the renegade, fiercely. "Then, by the lion's mane, he is in thy hovel!"

Dalia could hardly suppress a cry as he made the startling announcement:

"Girl, what sayest thou? One of my warriors saw him in thy company."

"I do not know who you mean?" she answered.

"Mean, girl? Do not dare to deny it! He was seen with you, but my warrior did not dare to attack him without consulting me."

"What does it concern you, Sir Chief, if I was seen in the company of a white man? Am I not of that race as well as you?"

The cutting words, so rashly spoken, caused the other to start with rage.

"Look out!" he hissed. "We have come for the Winged Trailer; and we'll hev him or tear this hovel down upon your heads."

In an instant the truth flashed through her mind. Roman had been seen with her and mistaken for the ranger.

"Jack o' the Plains is not in this building. Why do you come to make war upon us?"

"Girl, you needn't think to bluff us. We know the white dog is here, and we will have him in spite of all you can do. Tell us where he is and we will not harm you. Refuse, and—"

He did not finish the sentence with words, but his looks were enough to send a thrill of terror to the maiden's heart. Meeting his fiery gaze unflinchingly, however, she replied:

"Jack Shelby is not in this cabin, nor do I know where he is."

A fearful imprecation left his lips.

"You are a fool! Warriors, seize her. We will see if she can't be made to tell."

Half a dozen of the Comanches sprang forward at his bidding, and in spite of her struggles she was overpowered. The old hermit looked on with suppressed emotion.

"Dalia, if you know anything of the white, tell the chief."

"Never!" cried she, firmly. "I will die first!"

"Choke her!" commanded the mad chief. "She—"

At that moment the skin forming the door to the inner apartment was dashed aside, and Roman Carson bounded upon the scene. He had been aroused by the outcries, and as he reached the spot the Comanches were hurled headlong right and left by his furious blows.

"Back, there, you red heathens!" he yelled.

Quickly recovering from their surprise, the savages threw themselves upon him. Protecting Dalia as best he could, Roman fought desperately, felling one after another of his foes in his wild struggles. But the odds were too much against him, and, wounded and bleeding, he fell. A dozen tomahawks would have cleft his skull had not the heroic girl thrown herself upon him, thus at the risk of her own life shielding him from their blows. For fear of angering their chief they dared not harm her.

"Bind the dog!" commanded Tiger Heart, "and we'll take him with us."

Dalia saw that further resistance on her part was madness, and as her father offered no interposition, the Comanches prepared to leave with their captive.

"Look out how you hide away foes again," warned the Mad Chief, as they left the cabin with their captive.

Roman was placed on the back of one of the ponies, when his captors started with him toward their home. Dalia saw him borne away with a heavy heart. Meanwhile events of equal importance were transpiring elsewhere. Jack o' the Plains had prepared his silver bullet and returned to his lookout. It was nearly night, and the oblique rays of the setting sun shone upon the prairie with a dazzling light. As he looked out over the broad expanse he saw a party of Indians ride away from the growth on the right. Sweeping the horizon with his gaze, he discovered just leaving the wake of the sinking sun two horsemen rushing on like the wind toward the Comanches.

The next instant he saw that they were hotly pursued by a score or more of mounted men—Indians as he recognized them. The twain were white men, he quickly decided. A minute later the fugitives evidently discovered the foes in front cutting off their escape, for they suddenly changed their course to a right angle, the cries of the savages now faintly reaching Jack's ears. The ranger remained still with the greatest difficulty as he watched the exciting race. The two bodies of the savages now endeavored to intercept the flight of the whites, and soon they bore closely down upon the doomed men. Then the horse of one fell headlong to the plains, and its rider reached the earth to turn at bay upon his foes. Before his companions could turn to assist him the red demons had come between them, and all that he could do was to keep on. But it was evident that his horse had nearly run its race. Goaded on to greater speed than ever for a short time, it then staggered to and fro for a few rods and would have fallen to the earth had not its rider leaped from its back with a wild ringing cry, to continue his flight on foot.

The redskins yelled fiercer than ever, and urged their ponies on after the dismounted fugitive; but they soon found that they had no easy game to catch. At an astonishing gait the white ran on and on, showing no signs of fatigue. He had thrown away his rifle, and, unencumbered, swept on with wonderful strides.

"It's Longfoot Joe, or I'm a dead liar!" exclaimed Jack, growing more and more excited. "And he's coming this way! Hooray, old pard, hold up a minute longer and I'll save you, or Wingfoot's a dead hoss!"

With the words upon his lips Jack o' the Plains dashed down the descent, and an instant later reached the boys.

Never were two horses saddled and bridled quicker than they. Leaping then upon the back of Wingfoot and leading Redbird, he rode wildly out upon the plain. The white man was still maintaining the race, but the wiry ponies of the Comanches were proving too much for him.

"Whoop—hooray!" yelled Jack, in a tone that rang far and wide over the prairie. The

fugitive and pursuers looked up alike with dismay.

A glad cry left Longfoot Joe's lips, for it was he, as he saw his friend, and he bounded forward with renewed energy. The Comanches were for a time disconcerted, but seeing only one coming to the rescue, they again swept forward with prolonged yells.

"Now or never!" cried Jack, as he dashed alongside of his friend.

With Redbird's speed hardly checked, Joe vaulted into the saddle.

Grasping the reins, he struck the spurs into the horse's flanks, when the fleet-footed animal shot forward with the speed of the wind.

"Come on, you red rascallions!" shouted Jack o' the Plains, shaking his fist at the surprised savages as he flew over the prairie.

The ponies of the Indians were already feeling the effects of the work they had done, but their inhuman riders goaded them on without mercy.

CHAPTER XII.

FROM the start the swift-footed bays, fresh for the race, began to outdistance the failing ponies of the Comanches. Allowing the reins to lie on the withers of his steed, Jack o' the Plains, looked back, waving his hand and shouting ever and anon:

"Come on, old smoky hides! Hyur's whar you get your fun!"

Joe was too much exhausted from his late race to other than sit in his saddle with anxious looks ahead. Darkness was creeping on apace, and soon the dusky forms of their pursuers began to fade from view. Then their yells grew more and more indistinct until they were unheard. Finally, as they rode on at a more easy pace, Jack said:

"S'pose we give our horses a breathing spell? Don't believe we shall hev to go any furdur to-night, old beaver."

"Nary more do I, chum," replied Joe, reining up beside his companion. "Old boy, gin us yer paw; ye pulled me through slick, ye did, old hoss. I s'pected the reds wud be fingerin' my top-knot, and so they wud ef ye hadn't drawn up."

"Wagh, Jack Shelby ain't one to chaw his finger when a pard is desprit straightened. But how came you here when I s'posed you were at the settlement slick?"

"Wal, ye see, old hoss," replied Joe, "when me and Van and White Fox seed ye go out o' sight and we headin' fer the settlement, it made us feel like Greasers. It looked pesky bad, it did, and we know'd we shud be the laughin'-stock o' all the boys, so we didn't go very fur afore we turned heel fer toe and started arter ye. Somehow we didn't sight ye as slick as we opined, and this afternoon we got ambushed, by gravy. Poor Dan, the White Fox, fell at the fust fire. Me and Van slid out and ye seed the result. The Comanches hev his top-knot. But whar is the younker wot went off with ye, Jack?"

"Gone under, poor beaver. He fit like a good one, but we had a hard pull, and Wingfoot jest fetched me through. Joe, old coon, throwing in the younker, and he war a likely chap, we are all thar are left of the old band."

"Co-rect, my boy. Howsumever, the end ain't yet. Them Comanches 'll howl in a different way, I'm thinkin', afore we get through. How does the stick float with ye?"

"Wagh, it pints up the crik," replied Jack o' the Plains somewhat fiercely, looking defiantly toward the home of the Comanches. "We'll let our hosses rest a couple of hours, and then we'll take the trail."

At the end of the time they started cautiously northward. The sky was overcast, so that the night was quite dark, though they advanced along the edge of the plain that bordered the Red Lands with little difficulty. Nothing occurred to alarm them, and at last they stood in the valley where Jack had been on the afternoon before.

"We will leave our hosses hyur," he said.

A few minutes later they left the valley on foot, dodging along in the shadow of the growth toward the camping-ground of their red foes.

"Snakes eat 'em," growled Joe, "this is a

purty go, to be on the war-path with nary a shooter!"

"'Tis, sure. Wagh! Mebbe ye can get hold of a red's weapon. Hi! thar am a party of the coyotes. Reckon the woods am full on 'em."

Jack's assertion seemed literally true.

Crouching low in the undergrowth, they saw the war-party pass a short distance away.

"Hark!" whispered Joe, "the old Nick is to pay up yender."

They were near enough to hear a wild tumult from the Indian village. But their attention was attracted in another direction. Heavy footsteps were heard approaching, and a minute later the figure of a wild-looking man burst into view. His tall, gaunt form was clad in a garb of skins, and his eyes glowed like balls of fire in the semi-darkness. It was the old hermit of the Red Lands, seeming wilder than ever.

"Where is the light of my home?" he cried, shaking his long rifle above his head as he came crashing the growth.

Jack and Joe drew back with surprise. They were too late, however, to avoid discovery. Coming directly toward them, the strange man suddenly found himself in the vise-like grasp of Longfoot Joe.

"Stop yer noise!" hissed the ranger, as the other grappled with him, and they closed in a hand-to-hand struggle.

But the Comanches had already been aroused. Hearing them rushing in that direction with renewed yells, Jack sprang to the assistance of his companion.

Joe had found his match. The old hermit coiled his lank, wiry form about him after the manner of a huge boa, and his long, talon-like fingers closed upon the ranger in death-like grips.

"Shake him off—git!" cried Jack. "The hull lot of varmints are after us!"

As he spoke he caught hold of the madman and lent his assistance to Joe. Between them both the other was flung to the earth. By this time the Comanches were near at hand, and a second party was heard coming from another direction.

"Take the old chap's shooter and come along," said Jack.

Snatching up the rusty fire-arm of the hermit, Joe sprang after his companion, leaving the strange white in the act of regaining his feet. To retreat was impossible, and to advance was equally as hazardous, so they were obliged to flee at a right angle, which carried them in the direction of the plain. Joe soon overtook his friend, and side by side they bounded away.

Catching sight of their retreating forms, the Comanches gave pursuit.

Soon reaching the plain, they still kept on, putting forth every energy in their endeavors to escape. The second party of Comanches proved to be mounted, and they joined in the race with triumphant yells. Jack was a fleet runner as well as his companion, and the savages soon found that they had no easy game to catch. Of course, however, there could be but one result—the whites, sooner or later, must be overtaken. They knew this, but were determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible. At last Jack cried:

"Old beaver, this is a blind trail!"

"Wagh!"

"What's the use to spile moccasins in this way? Let's gin 'em a taste of lead."

"'Greed!"

Simultaneously they paused. The redmen were now within easy rifle-shot, and bearing down upon them like the wind. Like hunted tigers the rangers turned at bay. The moon, veiled by a cloud, but dimly lit the wild, weird scene. Seeing that their foes had turned to meet them defiantly, the Comanches increased their yells and prepared to attack them. Watching their opportunity, the hunted rangers selected their victims.

"Now!" exclaimed Jack.

Then two reports blending as one rang out, when a pair of the foremost redskins bit the dust. A volley came from the others, and deafening yells rang out in blood-curdling volumes. Springing to one side and dropping flat upon the earth, the rangers began to reload. The volley from their foes passed over their

heads, and then they sprang up, to send the deadly contents of their weapons into the bodies of two of the oncoming fiends.

CHAPTER XIII.

In order to keep pace with events, we must next follow the fortunes of Roman Carson, which can be briefly told. We shall not attempt to describe his feelings. Unused to such proceedings, his agony was fearful, and the red demons delighted to torment him in every way possible, and they were not a few. At last the forest bordering the stream was reached, and then the Comanches entered a beautiful valley, near the lower end of which Roman caught sight of a sheet of water, glistening in the moonlight like burnished silver. He had but little time or inclination to note the surroundings, and in a few minutes the home of the redmen burst into view. A wild, excited mob of paint-bedaubed warriors, hideous squaws and shrieking children were dancing frantically to and fro. As they caught sight of the war-party, the entire horde rushed forward to meet them, their unearthly cries fairly deafening the captive.

It seemed as if the wild rabble would seize him from their captors as they saw him. Some clutched him excitedly, others hooted, and yet others threw sticks and dirt at him. Even the old, decrepid men joined in the tumult. The Mad Chief waved them all back, however, and Roman was borne to the center of the village. Then the motley throng surrounded him, hooting, jeering, exulting in fiendish glee over his sufferings as they formed in a circle. Roman resolved to put on as bold a front as possible, and bravely meet the inevitable. He saw some of the chiefs talking, if their gibberish deserved the name, to each other, and ever and anon they pointed excitedly to a stake driven into the ground a short distance off.

A thrill of horror shot through the captive's frame as he realized the fate in store for him. Death at the stake! Finally he was dragged forward to the fatal spot. Then he was bound to the stake, and at once was begun a series of demoniac acts too revolting to be recorded. Dancing around him in a circle, the Comanches set up such a series of yells and shrieks that one could but feel that all the imps of bedlam had been let loose.

In the midst of this wild carnival a newcomer appeared on the scene. He was evidently an Indian chief, though he must have been young in years, and his gaudy trappings showed that he was a Comanche, but of a different party from those under the Mad Chief. He was mounted upon a noble-looking horse, which, while bearing evidence of having come some distance, was still in good trim for work. The Comanches hailed the new arrival with noisy demonstrations, while he greeted them with wild gestures and a loud whoop. At sight of the captive he gave vent to a regular Comanche yell, and thrust his spear toward the doomed white. This seemed the signal for renewed hostilities toward the captive, who had to undergo greater tortures than before. The young chief turned to speak to some of the other red leaders, so that Roman lost sight of him. In fact our unfortunate hero had quite enough else to occupy his attention. After tormenting him to their satisfaction in the manner indicated, the Comanche next began to pile a circle of brushwood around the stake.

The young chief had now dismounted and had joined the others in their fiendish work. His horse stood near by. Throwing down an armful of fagots, the Comanche stepped forward and struck the captive with the palm of his hand. He had repeated this several times, when, bending forward, he caught the prisoner's ear between his teeth and seemed about to bite it off.

A wild yell came from the spectators, and at that moment Roman heard the whispered command:

"When I cut your thongs mount my horse and ride for your life."

Before Roman could recover from his surprise the other had joined the mad rabble, and the fearful proceedings went on.

When at last everything was in readiness the

young chief himself seized a burning brand and applied it to the combustible wood. The temporary hopes that Roman had felt now left him and he felt that he was lost. The savages grew wilder than ever as the fire increased in volume. Suddenly Roman felt something cold touch his wrists, and then the single word rang in his ears:

"Now!"

He realized that his bonds had been cut—that he was free! He cleared the encircling brush-wood at a bound, and reaching the horse, vaulted into the saddle. Before the amazed Comanches could recover enough from their dismay to stop him, he had caught up the reins, when the spirited horse sprang swiftly forward.

Some of the most self-possessed of the Comanches attempted to stop his flight, but urging his fleet-footed steed swiftly forward, he cleared the mad throng.

With furious yells the redskins sprang in pursuit. Volley after volley of shot and arrows were sent after him. Fortunately he escaped unscathed. On foot the redmen had little hope of recapturing their victim.

Looking back, Roman saw them madly following him; but he looked in vain for his preserver.

Luckily for him, he shaped his course westward. Had he gone to the east he would have encountered the savages besieging Jack and Longfoot Joe. Soon reaching the growth, he dashed through its shadows, leaving the small lake to his right. He had no idea where he was going—only hoping to elude his noisy foes. He soon found that the horse he rode was not only fleet of foot, but promised great power of endurance. He was soon aware, however, that his pursuers had mounted their swift ponies, and though he had obtained a good start of them, he was booked for a long if not a close race. The same moonlight that seemed so much against the rangers favored him; at least it enabled him to advance with greater speed, and little versed in woodcraft as he was, his only chance lay in the distance he could put between himself and his foes. Gradually the cries of his pursuers grew fainter, and he knew that he was slowly leaving them.

The belt of timber grew narrower as he progressed, while on his left extended the prairie as far as he could see.

Roman could not help wondering how he came to have a friend in the person of the Comanche chief. He would have given much to have been able to speak to the friendly Indian. As such reflections were coursing through his mind he was suddenly startled by a crash in the growth ahead of him. Expecting an attack from a war party of Comanches, he reined up his horse in trepidation. The next moment the white steed, with the Headless Mazeppa, bounded into view. The wild steed uttered a snort of terror as it saw him, and turned to flee. Roman urged his animal forward in hot pursuit. He had not gone far, however, before a stentorian voice reached his ears:

"Hold up thar, wildfire! You ride like mad!"

Reining up his horse in surprise, he saw a couple of white men advancing.

They appeared friendly and he gladly waited for them to come forward.

"Look here, my fine fellow," exclaimed the foremost, "you had better be more careful how you ride or you will have the whole Comanche nation on your heels."

"Which isn't far from the case now," replied Roman. "Glad am I to meet you."

"Sho! guess we ain't very bad chaps to scare up. So you are having a little brush with the copper-skins?"

In a few words Roman told of his escape from the savages.

"Wal—wal, you are some and no mistake! Guess we'll skip 'long with you a bit, for it would seem that the varmints are too many for us three. What do you say, Bill?" addressing his companion.

"'Greed," was the terse reply.

CHAPTER XIV.

As Jack sprang back to drop upon the ground again after firing his second shot, he saw a slight hollow or depression in the earth near by. His quick eye instantly saw the advantage of the situation, and he cried to Joe:

"Quick, pard, hyur's our corral!" at the same time springing to the place. His companion quickly followed. The bottom of the hollow, which was six or eight feet in diameter, was about a foot below the level of the plain, and the bank around them promised protection from the bullets of their red foes. As they disappeared from sight the amazed Comanches reined up, while sending a cloud of arrows and bullets hurtling through the air. These, of course, were harmless to the whites, who were rapidly reloading their weapons. The tug of war had now fairly begun for them. Jack had not as yet used his revolvers, but he laid the weapons now so that he or Joe would have them handy.

"It's a cool head and a steady hand now," said Shelby, calmly. "Ha! the varmints are beginning to advance. Let's let 'em know we are round."

The savages were coming forward cautiously, not knowing what to expect, when the rangers thrust the muzzles of their rifles up through the grass that grew on the bank of the hollow, and with careful aim fired. Howls of rage came from the horde as again the foremost twain of their numbers threw up their arms and went headlong to the prairie. Another volley of shot was sent in the direction from whence the shots had come, and more than one bullet buried itself in the bank surrounding the besieged rangers. To show their heads would be death now, and being careful not to expose even a hand, they rammed home another charge into their death-dealing fire-arms. The Comanches had found that they had no slight undertaking upon their hands, and without advancing any further began to hold a consultation. The moon at this juncture appeared from behind the cloud, lighting the plain to almost mid-day brilliancy.

"That's bad for us," muttered Jack. "But how do you feel, old man?"

"Slick as a new wiping-stick. Say, old boy, don't the varmints look ugly? Oh, I cud git sich a purty bead on that tall chief. Wud ye do it, old pard?"

"Mebbe we had better let 'em chin it till they fix their plans, wagh. See, the moon will be covered afore they'll get through."

After a hasty consultation the Comanches were seen to separate and to advance at right angles upon them.

"You look out for them on the left," whispered Jack, "and I'll attend to the others."

Scarcely had the redskins began to move when the sharp reports of two rifles broke the stillness, and the leaders of either body went down upon the plain to rise no more. In the midst of the shrieks that followed other reports succeeded, and the disconcerted savages fled to a safer distance. This last movement allowed the rangers another breathing spell. A low chuckle came from Jack.

"Reckun they don't find much fun in running such a show."

"P'raps not; but their turn'll kem soon. I don't see no pesky show fer us."

"Wagh, the moon is agin us. If it war dark we might get away, but shining like that is as bad as daylight. However, as long as our powder lasts we can pickle them, and mebbe after all we shall outwit them. Many's the time I've felt like givin' under, when sumthin' would just lift me right out. Curious how near a feller will ride in his funeral and save his top-knot time and agin."

"True, old boy, and then it don't take much to lay him out. Seems as if he war knocked out by machinery, as Black Johnson used to say. There was Tommy Daniels, a right sharp lad, who fit with Captain Jack, and seed a heap o' tall fightin' till——"

"The coyotes are up to some new deviltry," whispered Jack.

Peering cautiously out from their covert, the rangers saw the redmen, who had been gathered in a huddle, begin to separate and make

different *detours* on the plain. Of course they could see nothing plainly, but they knew well what the red imps were bent upon doing.

"They are going to surround us," said Jack.

"Wagh! They'll find our powder dry yet, I kalkilate."

"So do I."

Calmly the intrepid twain awaited the issue. Half an hour passed, and not a sound had broken the ominous silence. Had the savages abandoned the siege? Full well did the waiting rangers know better. Light hazy clouds were drifting across the sky, and darting ever and anon behind these, the moon was often hidden from sight. But with every returning flash of light the rangers scanned closely the surrounding scene. At last Joe caught the sight of an Indian's plume in the grass on their left. A moment later Jack made a similar discovery in an opposite direction. In silence they raised their rifles, and as the moonlight gleamed upon the barrels two sharp spangs awoke the night, and then two dusky forms sprang into the air simultaneously, to fall upon the prairie in the throes of death. Again the stillness of the preceding moment reigned. Five minutes of unbroken silence followed, when an Indian's head was seen to rise from amid the grass, and an instant later to disappear.

"I am waiting for you," said Joe, grimly.

It wasn't long before Jack was watching a moving bunch of grass. But he knew well the object lurking behind it. If he did not, the terrible shrieks that succeeded the discharge of his gun told him.

Joe had not been idle, as a brawny Comanche warrior found to his cost. Not a shot had been fired by the savages all this time. A few minutes later, however, a dull thud was heard a short distance away. This was followed by others in rapid succession, and it soon became evident that the redskins were attempting a new mode of warfare. Finding it impossible to hit the whites—they lay so much below them—they had laid aside their fire-arms, and were shooting arrows directly up in the air, so regulated in the angle of their course by the aim as to strike the objective point in their descent. Here was a danger they had not counted upon, and were powerless to avert. The best that they could do was to keep the Comanches at a distance and trust in Providence to escape their heavy, sharp-pointed and barbed arrows, which would have pinned them to earth had one struck them. Several fell within the hollow and one pierced Joe's hunting shirt, but fortunately they escaped injury.

We need not dwell upon the tedious hours of peril that followed.

The rangers were compelled to maintain a ceaseless vigil, while expecting every moment to feel a Comanche arrow piercing their bodies.

Toward midnight the clouds cleared away, so that the night was clear and bright, leaving them no hope of escape by flight.

Then the hours of morning crept slowly on, bringing them no hope. The gray light in the east crimsoned to a rosy dawn, and the sun ushered in another day. Still the deadly missiles of their foes fell uncomfortably near.

Twice had Jack felt their keen points and Joe had received a painful wound.

CHAPTER XV.

THE Comanches finally became silent, and it seemed they had given up the siege. To test it, Jack placed his sombrero on the muzzle of his rifle and carefully thrust it into sight. It was quickly perforated with half a dozen bullets.

"By my soul!" exclaimed Joe, a few minutes later, "I do believe the varmints are up to some new deviltry. I smell fire!"

"So do I, old man!"

A startling suspicion came into their minds which a minute later resolved itself into a stern reality.

"Yes," declared Joe, who was maintaining a vigil on the westward, "I can see the smoke. The red devils are firing the plain!"

"Wagh, they mean to drive us out."

"So I reckon, old pard, and, what is more, they are going to do it."

The flames swept higher, and it wasn't long before they could see the fire plainly. It

had kindled rapidly and a fearful conflagration was spreading right and left. A strong breeze was blowing from the west, which was sweeping it on with the speed of a race horse. It would soon reach them.

"It is a fight and die!" said Joe, grimly, as he tightened his belt a notch. "They shan't say that old Joe Garlon went under with his heels up."

"Wagh, you are true grit, old hoss; but prime your shooter with damp powder if I can't read sign slick. Hyur's a coon as sees more fun than 'em Comanches ever dreamed."

Joe's countenance lightened. Jack quickly drew forth his flint and steel, and cautiously pulling a handful of grass growing on the edge of the bank, he struck fire.

"My gums, ye are sum!" exclaimed his companion, lending his assistance.

It didn't take them long to start a fire half way around the circuit of the hollow, which, when done, kindled rapidly. The same wind that swept the conflagration on from the west fanned the flames set by the rangers, until they rose higher and higher, spreading swiftly right and left. The Comanches, of course, had been forced to escape the path of the fire set by themselves, and now, with dismay, were they obliged to flee from before this new conflagration.

"Come, old man," cried Jack o' the Plains triumphantly, springing to his feet; "now's our time."

Between the two fires the rangers saw an avenue of escape. Cramped and benumbed from having lain so long in one position, at first they moved with difficulty. But a little exercise brought back to their limbs former activity, and they were soon rushing after the retreating fire with rapid strides. Nearly surrounded by the flames, we doubt if the redskins fully realized at first their attempt at escape. Be it as it may, it was not till the Red Lands were nearly reached that the flames died down so the Comanches could be seen in the distance. With nothing to feed its hungry flames, the foremost conflagration expired when it reached the border of the desert. One burned out where the other began, while the southern boundary of both had been the stream and lake already mentioned. A broad smile lit the genial face of Jack o' the Plains as he caught sight of the savages.

"Reckon the coyotes didn't think they war helping us to get away when they started their little smoke."

"Mebbe we had better hunt up the boys."

"Co-rect; but we've got to look sharp, for the reds are nigh."

Reaching the edge of the Red Lands, they ran swiftly toward the valley where they had left their horses. It would have been better for them at the time to have gone to the north. In that direction they might have easily escaped, but in the end it proved a God-send to others that they went as they did. In fact, however, we have it from Jack's own lips that he would have died before he would have deserted his faithful Wingfoot. In a few minutes they reached the stream that flowed from near the home of the Comanches to follow later the border of the Red Lands running southward.

"Thar kem the smoky varmints!" exclaimed Joe.

"Well, if the bays are all slick we'll give 'em the slip."

Then they entered the narrow valley where they had left their horses the evening before. They found the animals all right, the intelligent creatures greeting them with low whinnies of delight.

"Good old Wingfoot," said Jack, as he quickly prepared to leave the place, "you have another race to run. Carry me through this trail, old boy, and—"

"The reds are upon us, Jack!" cried his companion; "and our escape is cut off!"

"Texas is full of cut-offs!" exclaimed Jack o' the Plains, springing into the saddle. As his eye swept the scene he, too, saw that they were hemmed in. The valley, or whatever name may be given it more applicable, was bounded on three sides by precipitous ascents, rock-strewn and broken. The Indians now com-

manded the narrow pass that led to the isolated spot. To attempt to escape that way would be courting instant death. To turn at bay was equal madness. Jack saw this at a glance. The yells of the on-coming Comanches told that they knew it as well. Glancing quickly up the rugged height on the right, a wild war-whoop left Jack Shelby's lips.

"Foller me, Joe," he cried.

At the same instant he struck his blood bay a smart blow, crying:

"Go, Wingfoot, up!"

With gigantic bounds the noble horse leaped forward at the bidding of its master, heading directly toward the ascent. Longfoot Joe saw the daring movement, and urged Redbird to follow. The gallant steed needed no second bidding to do this. With wonderful leaps the light-footed bays rushed up the rocky height where it seemed impossible for even a man to gain a foothold. The Comanches paused with looks of awe and amazement, expecting every moment to see horses and riders go tumbling into the valley below. But higher and higher dashed the struggling bays, while the loosened stones went crashing down into the bottom. Once Redbird missed his footing, and for an instant horse and man seemed suspended in mid-air. Then with a mighty effort the steed regained its foothold, and with an encouraging cry from its master again shot upward. Wingfoot had already cleared the worst of the ascent, and a little later, with quivering form and panting breath, he stood on the barren summit. As Jack turned with an exultant shout his companion gained his side. Not a shot had been fired by the Comanches as they gazed spell-bound upon the daring feat. Wild cries from them now rent the air, though we suspect they were as much of admiration as anything else.

"Hooray!" answered back Jack o' the Plains, waving his sombrero above his head, "we stump you to foller!"

A volley from the discomfited redmen followed his taunting speech.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEFORE the rangers lay a sharp descent, though not as abrupt as the one behind them. They could look down on an extensive area of prairie; and as they hastily glanced in that direction, they saw three horsemen riding toward them at the top of their animals' speed. Apparently the trio had not seen them. What then was their object?

"They are white men," affirmed Joe.

"Wagh! but look thar!" and Jack pointed at a more exciting scene at the base of the descent.

They looked down upon the home of the hermit, and at that moment it was surrounded by half a hundred Comanches, dancing and yelling in mad excitement. The hut was already in flames, and in the hands of the red demons were the old man and his daughter. Their shrieks were now borne to the rangers' ears. The sight of all this had occupied but an instant's time.

"We are needed thar, old man," said Jack, quickly, pointing to the burning cabin and wild scene around it.

"I am with ye."

Once more the hardy bays were urged forward. At a breakneck speed they leaped down the descent, clearing boulder after boulder and leaping wide fissures in their headlong course. Erect as centaurs the intrepid riders maintained their seats and looked wildly forward. It was a thrilling scene. Suddenly the shrieking redskins, dancing in fiendish glee around the home they had doomed with their own burning brand, saw two horsemen rush down upon them with wind-like velocity.

Loud shouts rang from the reckless twain, and their rifles spoke in tones of death. Two of the Indian chiefs fell and the warriors turned in dismay to meet their foes. Into their very midst swept Jack and Joe, regardless of the odds. Right and left they dealt their startling blows. Little wonder the two score and a half of redmen were for a moment taken too much by surprise to meet their attack. Then they rallied with war cries that would have struck

terror to hearts less used to such unearthly tumult. The rangers had not counted their chances in vain.

"This is for Grizzly Van and White Fox!" yelled the ranger chief at the top of his stentorian lungs, as he led the wild charge with Longfoot Joe but a hair's-breadth behind him.

"And this is for Jack o' the Plains!" rang another voice above the din of the conflict.

Then the three from the plains joined in the mad attack. The Comanches received this assault from the rear with yells of terror.

Thinking a great number of enemies were coming, they broke in wild confusion. In vain the Mad Chief tried to rally them. Seeming everywhere present, he attempted vainly to infuse into them some of his courage. Jack tried to meet him hand-to-hand, but failed. The old hermit had fallen at the first of the fight, while Dalia was in the hands of the redskins. Hearing her cries, Jack and Joe dashed to her assistance, but were too late to save her. Seeing that the fight was going against him, Tiger Heart seized the girl in his herculean grasp and lifted her upon his horse. Then, with a triumphant whoop, he dashed toward the plain and in direction of his home. With wild yells the Comanches rushed after him, though soon scattering in every direction. Thus were the whites left victors of the field. Jack, however, was not content. He had seen the capture of the maiden, and as the Mad Chief dashed away he turned Wingfoot in pursuit.

"On Wingfoot—on!" he yelled, and he started in pursuit of the renegade chief.

Joe saw the daring act, and with a yell as loud rushed after him. The other, seeing the headlong chase, followed, though less rapidly. It seemed impossible that Jack should overtake the chief, but Wingfoot was doing his utmost. Never did the gallant bay better deserve his name. And barely half a length behind him came Redbird. Some of the Indians looked back with terror as inch by inch and foot by foot the rangers gained on them.

Jack's special object was the Mad Chief, whose coal-black steed, bearing a double burden, was fast losing ground. Once the renegade looked back, and then his whole attention was taken up in trying to outdistance his pursuer. He plowed his rowels into his horse till its dark sides were crimsoned with blood. In spite of all he could do, however, the bay steadily gained on him. All the wildness of Jack's nature seemed to have been aroused. Sweeping forward, so as to come alongside of the chief, he dropped the reins upon Wingfoot's neck. Seeing that escape was impossible, the Mad Chief drew his knife and raised his arm to deal Dalia a death-blow. With a scream she tried to break from his hold, but he held her as if in a vise.

"Die!" he hissed, and his uplifted arm descended just as Jack's stentorian voice thundered:

"Quit that, you red devil!"

At the same instant he was beside the other. There was a flash of steel, and Tiger Heart was seen to reel in his saddle. Dalia was torn from his grasp, and Jack's strong arm lifted her upon his own horse. Turning then, Jack dealt the Mad Chief another terrific blow, when, with a startling cry, the renegade went headlong to the plain. All this had been done without slackening the speed of the horses. Jack, having accomplished his purpose, now wheeled and turned back from the chase. Those of the Comanches who had seen their chief fall seemed little disposed to give pursuit. Prepared to cover his companion's escape, if necessary, Longfoot Joe followed him, and seeing that no further pursuit was intended, the others started to join them. Near the edge of the prairie the five met.

"You beat Captain Jack's ride all holler!" said Joe. "My eyes, won't these bays jest fly?"

"I reckon," replied Jack. "But are you hurt, purty one?" he asked of Dalia.

"No—no! but oh, this is terrible. And father—have they killed him?"

"Mebbe some of you had better look arter the old chap," said Jack. "We haven't much

time to spare, for the varmints are likely to come in for another show."

Joe and one of the others started at once to go to the old cabin, now nearly burned down.

"I wish we had another hoss for you," said Jack to Dalia.

"Mine and Mr. Carson's are in our corral," she replied. "If one of you will go with me we can get them."

"Sit right still then and we'll git 'em."

Guided by the maiden, Jack soon reached the corral, to find the horses, as she had said. It was but a moment's work to prepare them for use, and Dalia was once more on the back of her faithful Zip.

They rode back by the way of the old cabin—a pile of ashes now. Joe and his companion had almost given up their search for the old hermit, when they found his body some way from the scene of the fight. He was dead, as was seen at a glance. A Comanche bullet had taken his life. With a cry of pain Dalia had sprang to the ground and bent over his still form.

"Poor father!" she moaned, "at last your sufferings are over. But what shall I do? Alone in this terrible country!"

"Not alone, fair maid," said Roman Carson, who was one of the three, "but you have true friends who will see that no harm befalls you."

"Oh, I thank you for your kind words, Mr. Carson. I am glad, too, that you escaped the Comanches."

CHAPTER XVII.

"Look hyur," cried Jack, "if you ain't in for tall doin's, pick up your traps and git. I tell you 'em coyotes are comin' back soon like a full-grown toranader!"

"It seems too bad to leave the body thar," said Longfoot Joe.

"You can all dig a grave down by the plain in a few jiffies."

"Let's do it, boys," declared Joe, and the others quickly assented.

Dalia's grief was great, and with heart-rending sobs she threw herself beside the lifeless figure. Unused to such show of sorrow, the rangers were deeply affected, but in a short time they had prepared a grave for the body, when they tenderly placed the form in it. A few minutes later the solemn task was ended.

"We are none too soon," declared Jack. "See, the varmints are coming out of the tim'er. Come, let's go to the south."

The next minute the little cavalcade headed their horses in the direction indicated and rode swiftly away. If the Comanches gave pursuit, they did not get near enough to be troublesome. But little was said by the horsemen, and Dalia, occupied with her gloomy thoughts, said nothing, until at last Jack reined up his bay, saying:

"Here's water and here's grass for our animals, and I say let's stop a spell."

The others assenting, the horses were soon enjoying a much-needed rest. While the rangers and their new-found friends are chatting merrily we will give a few words of explanation. The twain whom Roman fell in with were two well-known Texan characters.

One was True Bill, who had been with Jack in more adventures than one, and as soon as he knew his friend was in the region would not rest until he had found him. The second was Matt Burley, a veteran plainsman. Roman had been nothing loth to join them, and their appearance upon the scene had been most opportune.

It was True Bill's voice that had given the ringing cry following Jack's rush to the fight. Of course there were many questions to be asked and explanations to be given.

Roman soon learned to his astonishment that Dalia was his deliverer from the Comanches. When the brave girl saw him borne away a captive she resolved to save him if possible. Knowing that the savages would not long spare his life, immediate action was necessary. The course she adopted seemed the only one open to her. Accordingly, disguised as a Comanche chief, she entered boldly into the village of the Mad Chief as we have seen. After freeing Roman and seeing him likely to escape, she

succeeded in getting clear herself, though she ran a narrow chance.

Maddened by the escape of the white, Tiger Heart hastened to the old hermit's cabin, with some of his warriors, believing that he or Dalia had been instrumental in cheating him of the captive. What followed is already known. Dalia felt keenly the loss of her father, who had been all in all to her. Roman tried to cheer her with words of consolation. And through her tears she looked up to him with trusting faith.

"Poor father! I know he is better off," she said; "but, oh, I shall miss him so much!"

"But you shall have a home that shall be far different from what you have had," he exclaimed, impetuously, seizing her hand, while they slowly and almost unconsciously wandered away from their companions. "Dalia, can I not say what I wish? I must. I love you! Yes, I love you dearly, and I want you to go home with me."

Her gaze fell before his, and she turned away her head.

"Darling," he cried, earnestly, "have I offended you—have I spoken too hastily?"

"No—no; not that. But you forget that I am only an ignorant forest girl who is not fit—"

"Please do not speak thus. I believe you are all that is good and true. You are beautiful beyond description, and I owe you a great debt. You have saved my life twice. But before that—from the moment I first saw you—I loved you."

Before she could reply a crash in a thicket near by them caused both to start back with cries of alarm.

The next instant the Headless Mazeppa burst into view. With a wild glance backward the white steed bounded swiftly away. Roman gazed after it with wonder and grief.

"When shall we learn the mystery?" he exclaimed, half aloud. "Poor brother! it will be hard for father and mother."

"Hope for the best," said Dalia, gently laying her hand on his arm. "You have my sympathy and—my love."

"May Heaven bless you, darling mine!" he cried, catching her in his arms and imprinting a kiss upon her lips.

"See! the others have discovered the white horse," said Dalia, gently freeing herself from his embrace.

The rangers had started to their feet and were gazing intently toward the mysterious object.

"It beats all," exclaimed Bill. "Me and Matt seed the critter and we tried to catch it, but somehow the tarnal thing was too quick enough for us."

"It's a long trail to the one who kapturs it," declared Joe. "Howsumever, Jack hyur thinks he am the boy to do it."

"It oughter be done. But it am mighty queer. I could swear the chap is without a head and that he war dead, if I hadn't seen him move."

"Then he lives!" exclaimed Roman, joining them at this juncture with Dalia.

"Matt and I seed him move, didn't we, old coon?"

"Sartin, but it beats me."

"Living, he must be rescued. I cannot delay here. I must follow and save my brother."

"Jest cool your narves till the horses get rested, then we will strike the trail."

"But the gal—she can't go with us."

"Oh, yes, I can," said Dalia.

Jack shook his head.

"It's likely to be a long trail. We may have to go beyond the 'dead plain,' and that will be into the Injun country."

"I tell ye," said True Bill, "the gal can keep with us till we get to the Brazos, whar I think Ruxton's Rangers are camped. They will soon be going to the settlement, and she can go with 'em."

"Just the plan. We'll start at once," declared Jack o' the Plains."

An hour later the six were in the saddle and heading westward. We shall not dwell upon the particulars of the singular adventures that followed. Striking the course taken by the

Headless Mazeppa, they rode after the mysterious horseman at a rapid gait. Twice they came in sight of the white steed, but both times it quickly disappeared from view. Half an hour after starting they were surprised to discover a solitary horse standing beneath a pecan-tree near the edge of a small growth.

Riding forward with more caution, they approached the animal, which gave a shrill neigh as they came nearer. Jack and Joe looked upon each other with surprise.

"It looks like Grizzly Van's hoss!" exclaimed the first.

"Wagh! it does!"

As they rode nearer they became more positive until they were finally convinced.

"How came the creetur hyur?"

"Dunno. He seems to have been standing thar some time, and has tried hard to get free."

"Let's poke round a leetle."

A hurried search was made around the place, but though a man's foot-prints were discovered, they saw nothing of him.

"Hyur! the tracks go this way," said Jack.

"Let's foller 'em, Joe, and mebbe we shall find sumthin' to s'prise us. The rest had better stay where you are."

Quickly dismounting, the rangers followed the footprints, soon leaving their companions out of sight.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JACK and Joe did not go very far before coming to a small stream, and lying near its bank they discovered a man's form.

"It's Van!" exclaimed Jack, "but he don't move."

"Mebbe he's gone under," said Joe, as they paused beside the silent figure. "No, great buffers! he moves!"

As he spoke the other slowly opened his eyes and moved feebly.

"What, old coon, still kicking?"

"Wagh!"

The monosyllable was uttered barely above a whisper, and the speaker seemed used up.

"He's been hit bad," declared Jack, pointing to a jagged wound in his breast, from which the blood had flowed freely.

"Say, how d'ye feel, old hoss?"

"I'm nigh 'bout rubbed out. I——"

"Don't fret, old beaver, and we'll put ye round slick. I'll just fix up that hurt."

Before Jack had finished dressing Van's wound the others had joined them.

The wounded man was borne to a more comfortable resting-place, and laid gently upon a blanket, when he declared that he felt better.

"He'll kem round slick," said Bill.

"But I'm afear'd he can't be moved right away."

"Co-rect. Wot's the plan?"

"We mustn't give up the trail o' the white hoss."

"The creetur has pulled up off yender. Mebbe we could work down that way and kapter it."

"You have corraled the play slicks. Let Matt and the yonker stay with Van and the gal, while we rode down and see ef we can't get the critter."

Roman would fain have gone with them, but he yielded to their judgment.

"Wait one minnit," said Jack, "till I load my shooter with something of more vartue than lead."

Quickly drawing the bullet already in his fire-arm, he replaced it with a silver one.

"Thar," he exclaimed, triumphantly, "I reckon I'll fetch the critter, or my name ain't Jack Shelby."

With a few parting directions to their companions the three rangers started on their undertaking. Following the line of growth, they advanced without exposing themselves to view from the prairie. The country on their left was more broken, though relieved by level tracts at different localities. The rangers soon came in plain sight of the white steed, when they paused.

"We had better surround the creetur," declared Jack.

"I reckon so," replied Joe.

"Wal, you keep a bit to the left and Bill to the right. But afore you stir you'd better let me make a circle and get on the other side of the animal."

"'Greed."

"Then don't stir till you hear the gray backs' cry."

With the words he headed his horse to the west and rode away. Keenly watching the surrounding scene, Jack kept on, being careful to keep out of sight and hearing of the Mazeppa. Not till he was sure he had got beyond the line of the creature did he dare to approach any nearer to the point where the white horse was still standing as far as he knew. Before him was an opening of several acres in extent, so that he was forced to leave the cover of the growth. Before he did so, however, he gave the signal agreed upon, and a moment later it was answered by his companions, telling that they were ready for action. Jack then rapidly advanced, soon gaining the growth on the other side. At that instant he heard the sound of hoof-strokes. Realizing that the strange horse had become alarmed, he pressed forward more rapidly.

A minute later the white steed burst into view, coming directly toward him. At sight of him the creature gave a loud snort, but did not turn aside. Jack was now in too close quarters to use his rifle successfully, and he spurred Wingfoot forward into the very path of the other, hoping thus to intercept its flight. True Bill and Joe at this moment appeared on the scene and rushed swiftly to the capture. It seemed that the white horse must at last become a captive. But it proved otherwise. When almost upon Jack it turned aside. Still it came so near that its white side brushed Jack's foot. He made a lunge to seize hold of its head. He missed. With a higher bound than ever the creature passed him. Wingfoot turned. Upon its heels he rushed. Then Jack did what he had no intention of doing at first. He gave pursuit. Wingfoot seemed eager for the fray.

Scarcely a length behind the white steed sped the bay. Bill and Joe uttered cries of encouragement to join in the wild race. Quickly leaving the growth, the Headless Mazeppa swept over the plain. Jack was so near that he saw the man move. Could he get nearer? Could he intercept the flight of the white steed? No horse on the plains was known that could equal its speed. Wingfoot could, if any. The gallant bay was doing his best. He hardly seemed to touch the prairie. For a time it seemed as if he was holding his own. Then Jack saw that he was losing—slowly but surely losing.

"Faster, Wingfoot, faster!"

Willingly the fleet-footed bay obeyed its master. It had caught the spirit of the race. It threw its whole power into the contest. In vain. Ay, we must acknowledge the swift-footed steed had found his match. More than his match! Inch by inch he was losing ground.

Jack soon realized this. Still he pressed on. His companions were following, though too far behind to benefit him, even had he needed their aid. Again he saw the Mazeppa move. This made him more determined than ever in his pursuit. At least a league was passed over. The only change in the race was what the bay had lost in distance. Jack saw that unless something turned up in his favor that his chase was hopeless. Wingfoot was beginning to show the effect of his fearful exertions. The white steed seemed as fresh as ever. Until then Jack hadn't attempted to use his rifle. He shrank from shooting the beautiful creature which he could not help admiring. But it was no time for hesitation. He could not hope to win the race. He must do the next best thing. With Wingfoot still doing his best, Jack raised his rifle. He glanced along its gleaming barrel. The distance was so short that he could not miss his object.

At last the strange white steed was doomed. Its race was surely run. With a rapid aim Jack pulled the trigger. A dull click followed. Nothing more. The weapon had missed fire. A cry of amazement left the ranger's lips. The white horse sped forward faster than ever.

Wingfoot rallied and for a brief time gained on the white. Jack o' the Plains' teeth clinched and his gaze shone wildly. With determined purpose he reprimed his rifle. Then he bided his time to get another shot at the flying horse. Again the Mazeppa moved.

CHAPTER XIX.

DID the white steed bear a charmed life? Jack o' the Plains believed it. Yet, with the dogged determination peculiar to his nature, he resolved to have another shot at the mysterious animal. If that failed, then would he abandon the hopeless race. Wingfoot was again losing ground. For a second time Jack raised his rifle. Again his keen eye swept its length. Once more its ominous muzzle covered the heart of the wild steed. Anew his trembling finger pressed the trigger. A second flash. The former dull click repeated. No ringing report. No death-cry. No change in the wild race. Still the white steed was unscathed. Still the Headless Mazeppa was borne on to his doom. A pallor swept over Jack's face as he lowered his useless weapon.

"It's no use," he exclaimed. "A silver bullet won't touch it. The critter is a spirit, or I'm a dead coon. Wingfoot, it is madness to chase it furdur. Easy, my boy, easy. You are the best hoss on the plains, but even you can't chase down a living spook. No, it's ag'in all nature. Let's wait for the boys."

We know the bay was glad to obey, and as he halted his quivering form showed the effects of the fearful ordeal he had gone through. Seeing that the white horse was still pursuing its course, Jack turned to watch the approach of his companions. It wasn't long before they came up.

"Great buffers, Jack, old hoss," exclaimed True Bill, "the critter beat ye arter all, and we thought ye war sartin sure of it."

"Wagh, it looks like it."

"And ye tried yer shooter?"

"Twice."

"And couldn't fetch it?"

"Nary onct."

"Sho! I'm throwed."

"So am I."

"The white hoss must be a speerit."

"I know it!" declared Jack, firmly. "You all see me load my gun with that silver bullet, and I had two purty shots, but my old iron that ain't missed for nigh onto five year hung fire! Wagh, she did. I tell ye thar a'n somethin' wrong. I know the crittur is a spook. Tain't any use to go furdur. I don't foller the trail any longer."

"It ain't any use," replied both Bill and Joe.

"But our hosses must hev a breathin' spell. Leastways Wingfoot don't feel like humping it back for a spell."

"Then mebbe we had better ride up to yender growth and stop awhile."

To this the others agreed. The Mazeppa was still in sight, the white horse having slackened its gait to a walk.

"The creetur won't go much further to-night," said Joe.

"Mebbe not; leastway, it won't hev to go very fur to git away from me."

Riding leisurely forward to the growth, they dismounted to give the horses their freedom. Jack had now opportunity to examine his rifle, when to his surprise he found that a grain of sand had entered its tube, fitting so closely as to prevent the explosion of the powder in the barrel.

"Smoke and ashes!" he exclaimed, "that beats a dead Injun all holler."

His companions were equally surprised.

"That tells how ye kem to miss the hoss."

Jack o' the Plains shook his head.

"The weapon war bewitched or it would never have got thar."

"I say, boys," said True Bill, "what's 'em?" and he pointed to the south.

Several dark objects had appeared on the plain, and as they watched them they grew in size.

"It's horsemen—mebbe Injuns," said Jack.

"Or a party of white men!"

"Likely as not it is Ruxton and his rangers."

said Bill. "Whoever they are, they are comin' this way."

This last was a settled fact. It soon became evident, too, that they were a party of whites. They soon counted six riders.

"They are Ruxton and the boys," affirmed True Bill; "at least a part of the band."

Gladly did they await the approach of the others. Finding, after a time, that they were likely to pass further to the left, Bill mounted his horse and rode out to meet them. Nothing loth, as soon as they found they had friends in the vicinity, did the rangers change their course.

"Well, this is indeed a surprise!" exclaimed the genial leader.

"Here's old Bill and Longfoot Joe, and— and Jack o' the Plains, as I live!"

"Oh, we've spotted a cur'us trail and seen sum of the tallest kind of doin's."

"How so? and how are the Comanches?"

"The Kymunches are hoppin'. But we reckon es the Mad Chief won't corral any more skulps."

"Why, hev you rubbed him out?"

"Wagh, Jack o' the Plains, old boy, did it in the slickest kind of a way."

"That's good," replied Ruxton. "But where are you bound next?"

"We hev got friends back toward the Red Lands. As soon as our hosses get rested we must start back. We hev just been trying to run down cur'us game."

"Not the Headless Mazeppa?" exclaimed Ruxton, in wonder.

"I reckon. Hev you seen the critter?"

"Yes, and we have been since yesterday morning trying to hunt it down. But I fear it has given us the slip."

"Not very fur, captain. It am just down yender."

"What, near by?"

"Less'n a mile."

"Then we are indeed fortunate. Come, will you go with us to capture the creature?"

"We will go," said Jack. "But I tell you now it will be no use. The hoss is a spirit."

"Spirit or not, we will soon know."

"I know now," said Jack, firmly. "Howsumever, I am with you."

"So are we," declared Bill and Joe.

"Good. But as your horses are well-nigh worn out, we will get on the other side of the Mazeppa while you three can approach him on foot and cut off his retreat in this direction."

The others were fain to agree to this, and a minute later they separated. Waiting until their mounted companions had time to get beyond the Mazeppa, the three started rapidly toward the supposed stopping-place of the white horse. The setting sun threw its parting rays across the plain with a sort of golden splendor, but the shadows were beginning to creep into the deeper forest.

Eager to capture their prey before night should set in, the rangers quickened their footsteps, until suddenly a loud crash was heard in the growth ahead.

"It is coming this way!" cried Joe. "Don't waste any powder now."

The hoof strokes came swiftly forward, and in breathless anxiety the rangers waited for the wild steed's appearance. It was coming nearest to Jack, who poised his rifle and waited the fatal moment with strange forebodings. The next instant a white form bounded into sight. Jack raised his rifle to fire, but the next moment he lowered the weapon with a cry of amazement. His companions did the same. The white steed no longer bore upon its back the mysterious Mazeppa!

CHAPTER XX.

UNMOLESTED the white horse was allowed to continue its course in freedom. There was no need to take its life now. The three gazed after the strange animal in silence until its spotless form was lost in the gathering gloom of night. Once more free, it swept on in all the wildness of its native freedom. As it disappeared from view Ruxton and the others joined them.

"So the Headless Mazeppa has again eluded us?"

"Not so. The white hoss has escaped, but it no longer carries the headless rider."

"Then the man must be in the growth. Let's see if we can find him."

Advancing along the course the wild horse had come, they soon found a human form lying in the brushwood. Horribly mangled and disfigured, it was evidently the unfortunate Mazeppa. The form was that of a medium-sized man, and the head was really gone.

"Poor fellow," said Captain Ruxton; "he had a terrible fate; but he must have been killed before he was put upon that wild horse. I wonder who he was?"

"My old pard, Brazos Bert, I'm mighty afeared," replied Jack, "though it's tarnal hard to tell, seeing as how the head is gone."

"Brazos Bert?" repeated Ruxton. "Why, bless you, he is safe and sound in camp. At least, he was this morning."

"Brazos Bert alive?" ejaculated Jack o' the Plains. "Do you mean it, old man?"

"Certainly. He ran the gantlet of the Comanches, though he did lose his horse, and reached our camp as good as twenty dead men."

"Whoop—hooray!" cried Jack, throwing his sombrero into the air. "This will be glorious news for the younker. Reckon I shall feel good, too, when I set my eyes on him again."

It seemed too good to believe.

"Ha! here is the cord that fastened the body on the horse. It is a white horse's hide with the hair left on, and that was outside. No wonder we could not see how it was fastened on. How came he there?"

"Ah, that question cannot be answered."

Jack was right, and to this day the full mystery of the Headless Mazeppa is unknown. From what the old hermit had told Roman it was believed that he had placed the body on the horse, though how he caught the wild steed could not be told. Perhaps his mad brother had helped him do it. Without doubt the man had been a foe to them, probably one of those who had so embittered their lives. Of course they had been crazed by their sufferings, but at last they had found rest and peace, and it is well that the secrets and mysteries of their careers should be buried with them. Jack and his companions prepared a grave for the mutilated body, and when their task was over they all turned back to where the horses were grazing.

"Come here, old Redbird," ordered Jack. "I have screaming news for you."

Jack and his companions, True Bill and Joe, decided to return as soon as possible to their friends, while Ruxton and his followers started for their camp, promising to join the others the next day. The first three found their friends anxiously awaiting them. Grizzly Van was feeling more comfortable.

"Cheer up," encouraged Jack. "I have good news for you. The Headless Mazeppa no longer cavorts over the plain."

"And my brother—what of him?" asked Roman anxiously.

"Shoot me for a liar if you want, younker, but your brother lives."

"Lives? Where is he?"

"With Cap'en Ruxton. He will come up this way to-morrer."

At first he could not believe the words, and but little sleep came to him that night. Were his high hopes to be realized? Dalia's grief seemed lightened as she beheld his joy. Before the sun had risen the following morning a horseman was discovered on the plain.

"It is he—my brother. I know it is!" cried Roman, unable to restrain his great joy. He proved correct. Truly that was a happy meeting. Long were the brothers clasped in each other's arms.

"And mother lives?" said Bert over and over again. "And I am forgiven?"

"Yes, dear brother. You will go home with me?"

"Yes; and I can hardly keep from starting at once. We must go as soon as possible."

"What a happy home it will be for them," said Roman, as he thought of their aged parents even then looking so anxiously for them.

A couple of hours later the entire party headed for the settlement, to be soon met by Ruxton and his band. When the journey had been safely performed Bert and Roman, with tears in their eyes, bade adieu to Jack and their other friends, starting for their distant home. Dalia had gladly decided to go with them, and neither of the three ever met Jack again, though they never forgot the gratitude they owed him. We need not picture the scene of that glad reunion. That was a day to be long remembered.

Until they sank into that perfect rest which comes to the pure in heart the fond parents could not speak of that happy hour without weeping, but they were tears of joy. Roman and Dalia were married to live useful and happy lives, and years after they were wont to repeat to the little band that gathered around them the story of those adventures on the Texan border. Hubert Carson, Brazos Bert no longer, never returned to the border. At times the old feeling of restlessness would come over him; but eventually becoming the possessor of a house with a loving wife to cheer and counsel him, he found there joys and pleasures elsewhere unknown. A few words in regard to our border friends and our tale is done. Wilkes Gray was found at the settlement, he having run the gantlet, reaching there more dead than alive, it seemed. The fate of English was never satisfactorily explained, though it was commonly decided that he must have died of a sudden attack of some disease—perhaps that of the heart—which had been quickened by the excitement of the time.

Grizzly Van, left by the Comanches on the plain as dead, came to his senses after they had gone, and succeeded in getting away, though had he not been found by his companions just as he was he must have perished. As it was he fully recovered to join his companions in many a stirring scene. No consideration would cause Jack o' the Plains to part with Wingfoot or Redbird, the last having been given to him by Brazos Bert. Who can blame him? The gallant steeds seemed to share with their master the spirit of the chase, and their forms were no uncommon sight on the plains.

We have given the mystery of the Mazeppa as far as it was ever solved. The moving of the body, of course, was the result of the loosening of the ligatures that bound it, and it was soon after torn from its position. Of the white steed we have to say that, though often seen, it was never captured. As if bearing a charmed life, and protected from captivity, it roamed the savannas and wild woods in freedom, solitary and alone.

[THE END.]

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